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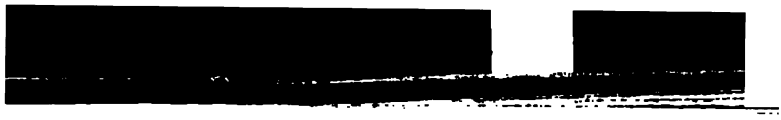
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A MAN IN LOVE

BY

ALICE M. DIEHL

AUTHOR OF

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"A LAST THROW," ETC.

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A Man in Love

CHAPTER I

THE snow lay thick on the ground—on trees, shrubs, every object in the undulating country that February day, as Captain Paulyn made his way through the outlying preserves of his brother's estate to call at Hill House, now and for long past the residence of the Dormers, Lord St George's land stewards, and distant connections of his by intermarriage.

But the dark, slight, handsome young man stamped and trudged along hardly conscious of the depth of untrodden snow. He was thinking of his momentous errand, as he gazed steadily at Hill House, a red-brick Tudor mansion, visible above the high-brick wall with the iron gates surmounted by the Paulyn crest—a dragon rampant—so soon as he was clear of the snowy woods.

He was counting his chances. St John Dormer was, he knew, out shooting over a distant farm.

That gave him time for his projected interview. Roland Paulyn had some of the impetuosity and enthusiasm of his Norman ancestors. Meanwhile, there was little else Norman in his determined, hardy nature. To will, and to exert every nerve to carry his project through, were one and the same with him.

He opened the gate with slight difficulty, laying down a paper parcel he had been carrying on the snow as he did so, then he walked along the recently-swept gravelled drive to the old, oak front-door—it was studded with huge black nails—and rang an aggressively clanging bell, whereupon the door was somewhat cautiously opened by an old man, who peered out with his gray, beetle-brows frowning over his blear, sunken eyes.

"Miss Dormer is at home, Gilbert?" The young man's voice sounded loud, masterful in the stillness.

"Miss Dormer is at home, sir," acknowledged the aged butler, his mouth working and his old eyes blinking as he spoke, as if the fact were distasteful to him. "And if you will please walk in, I will tell her you are here."

He admitted Captain Paulyn, carefully closed the heavy door, drew a curtain across, and went leisurely off between the heavy crimson velvet *portières* which divided the two halls, and Roland crossed the lofty chamber with the groined ceiling—a hall which was the favourite haunt of the Misses Dormer and their brother, the land steward where

a big billiard-table occupied the centre of a huge Turkey carpet, and luxurious chairs were ranged under the armour and oil paintings which hid the walls — and stood before the blazing fire of fragrant logs on the wide, old hearth.

"Silly old idiot—one would think he guessed my errand, and resented it," he mused, glancing upward at a portrait in oils of a young man in shooting-costume, which hung over the high mantelshelf. It was the work of a well-known portrait-painter, and had been hung in the Academy Exhibition of the previous year. The attitude was a strange, if easy, one. The handsome, fair young man with the golden curls, regular features, delicate skin, and cynical blue eyes, stood with one foot on a chair, his elbow supported on his knee, a half-smoked cigar between his long white fingers. There was a mocking smile on his well-cut lips.

"The painter-fellow ought to have seen him yesterday when we talked this over—and he wouldn't have made him look like a high-class villain as he has successfully done," he mused. Then he turned, and somewhat impatiently glanced around and about him. "He must have been a prime speculator with his mother's money, anyhow, and Beryl will have a dowry which will cancel any of Julian's possible objections," he was thinking, as he noted the signs of free expenditure everywhere. Then he caught sight of a wicker table. On it was a square work-basket, lined



with pale-blue satin, containing a filmy white morsel of ladies' work. By this was a "library book" with a narrow ribbon between its leaves..

He was sufficiently in love to gaze momentarily at these tokens of a recent feminine presence with a certain repressed passion, mingled with awe. Then he tore the flimsy paper from the package he carried, crushed it into a ball, flung it away into the heart of the glowing-wood fire, and laid the lovely nosegay of violets it disclosed by the work-basket. Then, with a side glance at the curtained doorway, he opened the library novel at the place where the ribbon-marker lay between the leaves.

His glance was attracted and captured by a sentence.

"'*You ask me whether I love you? I cannot remember the time when I did not!*' *she murmured.*"

"I accept the omen!" he mentally cried. And as he turned from the table he saw the girl he loved coming into the hall towards him.

Tall, graceful—there was that about Beryl Dormer, in her plain, gray winter frock, which suggested the empress in disguise. She trod with a certain assured step, her beautiful head poised proudly on her graceful neck. There was a proud, determined expression on her lovely, fair face, as well as about the pencilled brows, the slightly drooping but exquisitely-moulded lips. But there was more than pride in the large, thoughtful, blue

eyes, which fixed themselves on her old friend and playmate. There were both dread and anxiety.

"Thanks for seeing me, dear," he began, in a low voice, hoarse with emotion, as he held her hand, and, looking in her eyes, wondered at their scared and almost defiant gaze. "But—what has happened? You look frightened, almost—if such a thing as Beryl, frightened, is within the bounds of possibility!"

"That note of yours was enough to scare—oh, anyone!" she exclaimed, seating herself in the low chair by the table. "See you at once—get rid of Cynthia—something most important! What lovely violets!" She took them up.

"Whenever I see those violets in the houses they make me think of your eyes, Beryl—so I made Hayward give me a bunch for you!"

She buried her delicate nose in the fragrant blossoms, gazing curiously up at him, as he spoke the words with a fond, lingering intonation.

"What nonsense! Although I thank you and your Hayward — but — tell me the mystery! What have you come for?" she abruptly asked, gazing at him with mingled fear and apprehension.

But he detected neither, in his lover's preoccupation.

"You ought to know!" he hoarsely said, the colour forsaking his dark face. "St John knew before I had had time to speak—he had expected it—and you—oh, Beryl! It is not so very many years ago that you told me you loved me! Don't



you remember? When the dad was alive, and there was no idea of Julian being at headquarters, or your poor father dying, and St John in charge—"

"Oh don't, don't remind me of those days!" she passionately cried. He had noticed that as he spoke she shuddered slightly. "Of course, when you asked me if I loved you, I told you yes, because it was true! But I hope I love—everybody! Surely it is not that which you made all that horrid mystery about? Why, I thought you had some awful thing to tell me which would turn my hair gray on the spot, age me before my time, and all that sort of thing! Nothing else would have made me scheme to get poor Cynthia out for the day when she didn't want to go, busy as she is with her *trousseau*."

He suddenly knelt down, and leaning against the elbow of her chair—an old-fashioned one, which she liked because it had been her dead mother's—he clasped her hand in his.

"Beryl, you must be my wife," he hoarsely said. "You must! I don't care what you feel or think, I feel enough for us both. You must marry me. I will not live without you!"

His dark eyes shone with passion. The veins stood out on his handsome brow. Beryl stifled an inclination to cry out. He was dear to her, very—she had at times wondered how she would resist him if he were to storm the fortress of her maiden reserve. But she never, never would

marry a Paulyn against the wish of the head of the noble family, the reigning Earl.

"Do be sensible, I beg, I pray," she began, imploringly. "There can't be any question of my caring for you, or you for me, until Lord St George has been consulted! Have you asked him? No? Then you cannot expect me to talk of such things—to consider anything of the sort for one—single—minute! To ask his permission was the very first thing to do—yes, and you were bound in honour both to him, and to me, to do it! I would never enter any family without their express wish—ordinary consent would not do for me—they would have to wish me to belong to them. And I—the bailiff's sister—to marry his employer's only brother! Why—I would rather die than do it!"

She strove to wrench her hand from his clasp, to push him from her. But he was too strong for her.

"Bailiff, indeed! Don't insult St John by such a term!" he exclaimed hotly. "When the Dormers have been the Paulyns' vice-regents since goodness knows when—and are actually Paulyns themselves by intermarriage! Our marriage will only be 'history repeating itself.'"

"I am sick of that old story," she returned, with determination. "And you cannot know the rights of it to quote it as a case in point. Poor Isobel Dormer was so snubbed and belittled after her marriage—yes, and by the Earl and Countess and all the Paulyns—that it broke her heart. She



died within the year—and within a twelvemonth he married again. Thank you, I would rather die an old maid than have a fate like hers! Honestly, if it will give you any pleasure or comfort to know it, I never mean to marry! I can promise you, if you will leave me alone, never to marry any other man! Won't that satisfy you?"

"I ask you for bread and you offer me a stone!" he cried, not without a certain triumph —for, in his estimation, her whole demeanour, as well as every word she uttered, pointed to the fact that his love was certainly not unrequited. "No! It will not do for me—and you know it as well as I do! Beryl—be true—don't stoop to fence this crisis off. I love you so that I have a sort of second sight when I am with you—I seem to know, or rather feel, what you are feeling! And I have felt each time I have spent my furloughs up at the Court that you knew I was only biding my time to ask you to be my wife! Do you deny that you knew it?"

"I deny nothing," she slowly said, leaning back in her chair. But her voice faltered. Those sweet violet eyes he loved were veiled by their white lids. He took courage.

"Deny that you love me—or I will take your silence as 'yes' to everything!" he said, watching her face.

"I certainly shall not deny, because I know nothing about it!" she boldly returned, looking

him full in the eyes. "I may, or I may not! And whether I do, or don't, will make no difference to me in one way. I should not even put the question to myself, whether I care for you in the way you mean, unless Lord St George came to me and asked me—himself—to enter his family as his sister-in-law! And the end of the world will come—before that happens!"

"Certainly not!" he cried, with assurance. "Julian is a dear fellow! He would do a good deal more than that for me! Remember, he is more a father than a half-brother to me. Have I asked him? No, not yet—because when he saw you all last, you were gawky children—I want him to meet you first—you, as you are now—before I say anything. Then he will understand! That is why I made up my mind to wait no longer, dear! He is coming next week—and his cousin, Lady Grayson, will keep house at the Court. He means to stay and see everything, and look into everything; they will be here a couple of months, certain. The first thing will be a dinner and a dance. Lady Grayson will, of course, call, and then invite you. I am sure you and she will be friends."

"Oh, pray, pray stop!" she cried. "The days of fairy tales are over!"

"You are so abominably matter-of-fact, and such a pessimist," he began discontentedly. "I wish you were more like your brother! Come, at least promise me to give Julian a favourable

answer when he pleads for me, which he shall do —oh, you may look! you will see who is right, presently—I repeat, before I budge an inch from here, you must promise not to choke off Julian as you have tried to choke off me! For he does not know you as I do, and after he sees you, may come back and think, if he does not say as much, that I am a conceited ass to have imagined I had a chance when you don't care twopence what becomes of me."

He pleaded on until, just as someone came whistling up to the house, and somewhat noisily opened the big door and closed it again, he obtained her reluctant consent to consider the subject of an engagement if Lord St George fulfilled his—his younger brother's—expectations. Then, the original of the portrait, St John Dormer, entered, laid aside his gun, and came up to them smiling.

"Deuced cold, but you two look warm enough," he said, as he took up his place on the tiger skin before the blazing fire, his hands behind him. He gave a peculiar smile as he glanced from Paulyn to his sister, who blushed and looked away.

"Then I don't look as I feel, old man," returned the young Captain, bitterly. "Matters are not what we expected—you and I."

For once St John Dormer looked as his portrait looked hanging above him—his smile changed to a sardonic grin; his blue eyes flashed with an

angry light; his handsome chestnut-coloured brows contracted.

"Eh? What do you mean?" he asked. His tone had altered to one of startled annoyance.

"The lady's conditions must be fulfilled before you can congratulate me, my boy," said Paulyn, half banteringly. "The head of the family must plead my cause before I can obtain a hearing."

"The head of the family? I am sure you ought to know how delighted I was, and am, Beryl!" exclaimed Dormer, impetuously. "If I could have been asked my very fondest wish for your future—"

"Oh! It was the other head of the family, mine, old fellow," interrupted Captain Paulyn. "Nothing less than St George himself will do. He must come and solicit, hat in hand. But he will, make no mistake about that. He will—after he has seen Beryl! And I have just been telling her about next week. You have heard he is coming, of course? I heard yesterday."

"Lord St George coming next week? A flying visit, I suppose? I wonder I have not heard." The young man bit his lip. "I am afraid he has been told something of this, and disapproves."

"Bah! You are as much of a croaker as Beryl after all," cried Paulyn, gaily. "I must explain everything. Here comes the ancient servitor with tea. You will give me a cup, I presume?"

The old man came cautiously along bearing a silver tray, a neat maid with long cap-strings floating behind her carrying another, and presently the three were seated round the hearth, Beryl silently dispensing the tea, and Captain Paulyn eagerly explaining and arguing—seconded in monosyllables—but monosyllables which were interjections strenuous and to the point—by the young land steward who had, by his father's early death, suceeeded to somewhat heavy responsibilities. But although Beryl said to herself, "It is not fair; two against one," she held her own against her lover and his ally, her only and elder brother, who, a few years older than his orphaned sisters, stood to them *in loco parentis*. Then, as the lamps were lighted in the house, Captain Paulyn went out from the cosy warmth of the pleasant dwelling into the chill dusk, with the faint starlight intensifying the cold contrast of dark objects and dead white snow. He had no real promise of future happiness from the beloved lips of Beryl Dormer wherewith to warm his heart. His sole comfort was to tell himself over and over again that his darling was hyper-conscientious, and that that very fact would weigh enormously in her favour as a possible future wife for him in the eyes of his stern, if just, elder brother, Lord St George.



CHAPTER II

BERYL had been taken aback by her brother's attitude in Captain Paulyn's regard. There was truth in what her lover had said, that she had instinctively known his affection for her, his devotion to herself and her sisters, he had even made a pet of the twelve-year-old Pearl, now at boarding school, who had only very lately ceased to be called "Baby" in the family circle. But until that very day, the subject had not been touched upon between the brother and sister. Both were somewhat self-contained and given to reserve—St John, in spite of his seeming urbanity and outspokenness, being taciturn when he chose to an extraordinary degree, and being mutely resentful on the rare occasions when the anxious Beryl or the irrepressible, lively Cynthia ventured to ask questions anent aught save the most superficial and trivial matters.

Beryl literally knew nothing of their real "business." She knew that her dead father had had a large dowry with their mother, although their marriage had been one of mutual affection; that he inherited it all at her death when Pearl was

born, and had consequently made such successful speculations that his will was proved, at his death, for a goodly sum—left partly to St John, and partly to herself and her two sisters, with St John as their trustee until they came of age, when each would receive her fortune.

She was now nineteen, but had never been enlightened by her brother as to how he had dealt with her money. He gave her a quarterly allowance, and paid all the bills. She was perforce content. Until to-day, perfect peace had reigned between them. She trusted him "all in all." When he showed what she considered an entire lack of pride and self-respect in siding so absolutely against her in favour of Captain Paulyn, her whole nature was roused. She felt absolutely wrathful.

She remained standing in the hall where she had said "good-bye" to her suitor until St John returned from "seeing him off the premises" as he termed it, when she met him with a determined gaze of her clear blue eyes. "St John," she began, and although her voice trembled, her tone was cold, if not stern. "We must have this out. You shall not throw me at anyone's head! If anyone had told me you would, I would not have believed it! Why did you? Why degrade me? Why make me almost hate the day I was born—for that is what I feel at this moment — to be believed by Lord St George to have laid a trap for his brother! For that he will believe!"

"You must be mad!" said her brother, scornfully. He went to her, gave her a frantic glance —seized her hands, then, suddenly flinging them from him, he collapsed into a chair, and became lividly pale. "Water," he panted, tearing open his collar—then his head fell back on the cushion; he seemed to faint.

Beryl, alarmed, fetched water and brandy from the dining-room, and with tender, penitent endearments administered both in teaspoonsfuls, being greatly relieved in a few minutes to see the colour return faintly to cheeks and lips.

"You must not speak!" she commanded, as he began to thank her.

"I must," he murmured. "Now you are answered! You have seen—you can understand —why I want—a protector—for you—for the girls!"

She staggered up, and seating herself by him, gazed anxiously at his dulled eyes.

"What—do you mean?" she faintly asked.

"You know—the dad's heart took him off," he began languidly. "Mine will serve me the same. Last time I went to Cantelupe, he said it might be any day, any moment! I want to see you Paulyn's wife before I die! He is the heir. You would reign at the Court. Surely, surely, you will not refuse what may be practically a dying request?"

"Oh!" She clasped her hands. This was a fresh surprise—a bad blow. "I never once thought that! Oh, St John—you seemed so well,

so strong! I can hardly believe it! But—but —Lord St George may marry. Captain Paulyn has only a younger son's income—why set your heart upon a thing which may make me unhappy —snubbed—degraded?"

"There is your beggarly pride again!" he said, with intense bitterness, rising cautiously into a sitting posture. "Upon my word, I do believe you would rather see me dead at your feet than have your vanity hurt! And who is there to hurt it? There are no women to speak of in the Paulyn family. Men don't snub women—they don't want to—they are superior to that kind of thing. The Earl will make no objections. How can he? You need not be the Countess St George if he does not wish you to be—he can marry, as you say. It is all abject tomfoolery this nonsense of yours, and I have not common patience with you."

He held forth on the subject with more and more insistence as he recovered from his faintness —and the upshot of the interview was that Beryl allowed him to undertake to tell Captain Paulyn that she consented to be provisionally betrothed to him pending his brother's consent and sanction. She made one condition. He was not to seek her until she had been visited by Lady Grayson and invited to the ball. In fact, she declined to see him until the very night of the dance.

"It is idiotic—but I suppose you must have your way," grumbled her brother. But he told

himself, after his interview with the young Captain the following day, that Beryl was more cunning than he was. Roland Paulyn, although discomfited, was deeply impressed by Beryl's restrictions. He spoke of her with bated breath as of a being above and beyond the rest of her sex. "It is all for the best," St John Dormer told himself. "Now, everything depends upon the way St George will take it."

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A few days after Beryl's first experience of love and matrimonial intentions, the frost, which had bound the country-side for some few weeks, gave place to a warm thaw, followed by days of rain. The roads were sloppy, the fields impassable, and the girls at Hill House rode instead of walked—they each had a riding horse—Beryl carefully avoiding the neighbourhood of the Court.

The great white mansion, almost if not altogether shut up since the death of the late Earl, had awakened to life somewhat like the palace of the Sleeping Beauty. The windows were no longer like rows of shut eyes. Carriages came and went through the park. There were afternoon callers, invited visitors, and a large house party drove and walked, hunted and shot. A few days after Lord St George had begun to keep house, together with his cousin, Lady Grayson, Beryl and her younger sister Cynthia, who was shortly to be married to the son of a rich brewer in the neighbouring town,

were sitting at work in a top room which was formerly a day-nursery, when they heard carriage wheels, and Mary, the parlour-maid, came running upstairs to announce "Lady Grayson."

"Gilbert asked her ladyship to go into the drawing-room, Miss, but she would stay in the 'all," she added, with evident disgust.

"Very well, I will come," said Miss Dormer, laying down her work. "You will come, too, of course, Cynthia."

"Must I?" Cynthia was a fresh-coloured, delicately-moulded young creature—fairy-like and uncommon-looking with her waved pale golden hair and her doe-like, startled, if soft brown, eyes. "Why? She will never know Jack's people, so I don't see why I should bother."

"Do come, dear!" implored her sister so earnestly, that although Cynthia knew nothing of Captain Paulyn's courtship—Beryl could keep her own counsel when she chose—she felt that Beryl had some strong motive in not wishing to entertain the Earl's cousin alone, and accompanied her downstairs.

A tall, gaunt woman in rustling silken garments rose as they entered, and languidly contemplating them through her long-handled eyeglass, as languidly shook hands with a faint, somewhat deprecating smile.

"My cousin asked me to call," she explained as she sank back in the roomy chair she had selected. "What a very charming place this is,

to be sure! Was it not formerly the 'Dower House'?"

"It may have been," acknowledged Beryl, inwardly resenting her visitor's manner and tone, which she fancied patronising, as well as somewhat bored at being told off to patronise. "But it has been occupied by my family for ever so many generations, since a Paulyn married a Dormer."

"Two Paulyns married two Dormers, Beryl," chimed in Cynthia, in her sweet treble, half shyly, half defiantly.

Lady Grayson raised her eyeglass once more, gazed at the pretty girl with an indulgent expression and smiled, her head a little tilted.

"Your younger sister, I suppose?" she inquired graciously.

"Yes," said Beryl, shortly.

"If she is 'out' I hope she will accompany you and Mr Dormer to our dance on the fourteenth," went on Lady Grayson, amiably.

"I don't know whether I am 'out' or not, but I know I am to be married on the twentieth," returned Cynthia, with the bravado of the nervously shy.

If she had dreamt that the statement would procure her betrothed an invitation to accompany them to the ball at the Court—she hardly knew whether she had hoped such a thing herself—she was mistaken.

"Indeed?" said Lady Grayson, with gentle interest. "I am sure I wish you every happiness!



Marriage is a lottery, though, for everybody. Is not your sister very young to be married?" she added, turning to Beryl. And that was all. After a few commonplaces, she rose and departed with an air of such relief that the girls looked at one another as the carriage drove away, and laughed.

"Horrid woman!" cried Cynthia, disgustedly, "I am as sure as that I stand here that she thinks she has earned eternal happiness for her condescension!"

"Well, it is a condescension," said Beryl, bitterly. "I would rather not go to the ball—I would rather have nothing whatever to do, socially, with the Earl and his family! But we are their debtors, Cynthia! They let us live in this house, which was never meant for a land steward. It most probably was built and intended for the dowager Countesses, when their husbands died, and the eldest sons came into everything. And the salary is a 'fancy one,' when one hears what other land stewards get. No, dear, if you don't care to be patronised, I must put up with it for St John's—yes, and for gratitude's sake!"

However, Cynthia had tasted but little gaiety in her country retreat, and she made no demur when the topic of the dance at the Court came upon the *tapis*. The subject which concerned her most was which frock she should wear. Her brother had been quite munificent when the wedding was actually fixed.

According to her father's will she could not touch her capital until she was of age. But St John had volunteered to advance her a considerable sum, and when she sounded him anent her marriage outfit, had half jocosely asked her not to pledge his credit for more than three hundred pounds. So she had what any girl would have termed "lovely frocks"; the only difficulty was, which of these lovely frocks she would wear at the ball given by Lord St George.

Beryl had bought herself a handsome gold and white brocade for Cynthia's wedding, which was so made that by a slight alteration it could be worn as an evening gown. So Cynthia could wear any colour almost, without clashing with her sister's toilette. She inclined to a green chiffon trimmed with lilies of the valley and silvery bows. But Beryl asked her, as a great favour, to wear a thin white silk trimmed with delicate chiffon frills.

"Do not let us set ourselves up as apeing the Paulyns and their set," she somewhat acridly said. "My frock is quite that your mother might wear: be the simple young girl—the land agent's sister—choose a low place among them that the people cannot sneer at you."

"How awfully proud you are, Beryl!" exclaimed Cynthia, nettled at being thwarted in her desire to appear among Lord St George's guests in all her trousseau bravery. "Don't forget the old saying that pride comes before a fall!"



It was little likely that Beryl would forget it. When the mind is troubled, memory weights it still further by recalling every depressing idea—and during those days between Lady Grayson's visit and the dance, Beryl was in such a desponding mood that nothing heartened her.

Since her brother's attack of faintness, she thought she understood his eagerness to know both of his sisters "settled." Eagerness was the term which best expressed his attitude when the brewer's son, John Lambton, had made Cynthia an offer of marriage, and when Roland Paulyn consulted him before telling Beryl of his love.

He was doomed, she told herself—her handsome, admired, brilliant brother, St John—even as his father had been doomed before him. The thought was so afflicting that in her misery she could not ascertain her own feelings in regard to Roland Paulyn.

As a child she had liked him—and at those rare intervals when they had met since the old Earl died, and the Court was practically shut up, she had grown to admire him.

But—love?

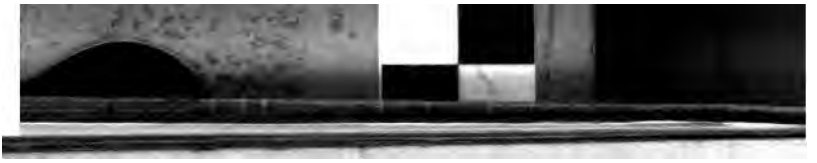
"I suppose I shall never have one of those sentiments they write about in books," she told herself. "A girl in a novel pines and dies if the man she loves is separated from and lost to her in any way. Should I pine and die if I never saw Roland again? I don't think so! The relief of not having to marry above my social

status, principally to please St John, would be so great, that I don't think it would be in me to grieve, even if I were sure we should never meet again!"

The day of the dance was almost spring-like. The birds were twittering their St Valentine love songs. Buds were peeping timidly out upon bush and tree—the gardens were golden with crocuses. The sky was a pure opal, in the expanse of which the evening star scintillated, diamond-like, when Beryl drew down her blind and lighting her wax candles began to dress. She was never long at her toilette. Half an hour later, descending to the hall to await the others—two of the maids were assisting Cynthia to attire herself—she found St John pacing the lighted hall. He turned and gave her a crestfallen glance.

"Whatever possessed you to dress like that? he exclaimed, annoyed. "You might be a woman of fifty! You are going as Cynthia's chaperon? What abject nonsense! You know very well how much depends upon how you look to-night! You ought to have dressed young, all frills and furbelows—there! like Cynthia," he added, as Cynthia, fair, radiant, lovely indeed in her snowy dress with its gauzy trimmings, came fluttering in like some huge white butterfly. "Cynthia—I am objecting to Beryl's frock! It is absurd."

"It does look rather frumpish," said Cynthia, contemplating her sister with her pretty head



critically on one side. "But—look here, St John! We neither of us want to look as if we were husband-hunting! It doesn't matter so much for me—I am going to be married next week—but I know Beryl wants to be the grave and reverend Signorina!"

St John grunted—then old Gilbert came into the hall—the carriage was at the door—and after the two girls had assumed their wraps, their brother and guardian put them into the carriage and drove to the Court with them in silence. He had been more than usually silent of late—Beryl attributed it to his knowledge that his life was so cruelly threatened—his young life, which had hardly learnt its own meaning or capacities as yet—and her heart yearned with pity and tenderness as his and her own mother's might have done. She felt all indulgence, all sympathy. It was more manly of him to be silent than to howl, she thought, as he handed her from the carriage, and as she ascended the wide stone steps in the blaze of light which issued from the brilliantly illumined interior, she gave his arm a little squeeze.

He started, gave her a nervous stare, then smiled—a cheerless kind of smile.

"Do your best for us all, there's a dear!" he said, in low, husky tones. "Don't let your infernal pride be the death of me!"



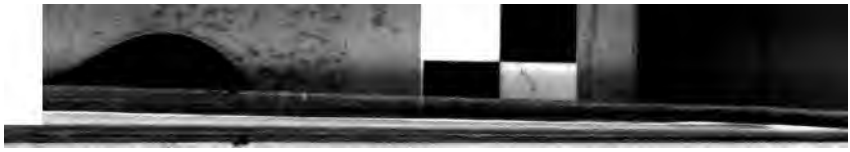


CHAPTER III

HAD her brother been planning a union between the families long before he spoke? Beryl asked herself, ruefully, with a new suspicion, as she and Cynthia left their wraps with the prettily-dressed maids in the room set apart on one side of the great hall, and accompanied St John to the entrance to the big ballroom. But she had no time to ponder. Her lover met her, dark, handsome, a passionate look in the glistening eyes which sought hers with pleading insistence.

"I was right, dearest—St George is a brick! He will speak to you to-night. You will do your best for me, won't you? Come and say a word to him, do! Be a darling—give him one kind look, and he will be your slave!"

With a sigh at this second appeal almost immediately after her brother's—feeling that she was being driven, forced indeed, before she had time to realise what she was doing, Beryl entered the well-known and admired ballroom, rebuilt by the late Earl—a long room with frescoed walls, a carved ceiling; a chamber all gilding and Venetian glass, the walls lined with a border of plants—and

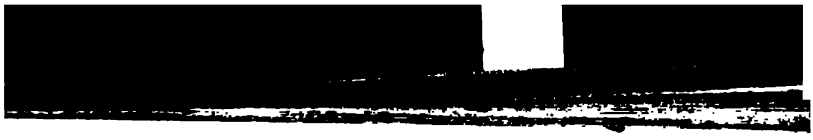


walked by Roland's side along the slippery parquet, feeling as if suddenly plunged in some wild dream. Where did all these pretty girls and graceful women, beautifully, even exquisitely dressed, and their good-looking, sometimes handsome, partners come from? The band, too, which discoursed sweet music in the gallery above, played far better than the military bands she had heard on rare occasions at county cricket matches or the big garden-parties of some of the county magnates who included the Dormers in their outside visiting lists. The delicious colours of the myriads of plants, the intoxicating perfume, the delightful valse that both roused, enchanted and soothed her with its sweet, plaintive melody—all united to excite her nerves and to entrance her senses until she felt totally unlike herself.

While she was struggling to be sober, matter-of-fact, even stolid, Roland led her up to two men who were standing near a curtained doorway leading to one of the several picture-galleries. He touched one—a tall man, who had his back turned towards them—on his arm.

"Julian! This is Miss Dormer," he said.

The man turned, and Beryl felt startled, astonished. This dark-faced, grave-looking being was strangely like some of the Paulyns in the Vandyck portraits about the house—but not at all the Lord St George she had seen years ago, on horseback, or in flannels in the cricket-field, or following his father's coffin with bent head and



downcast eyes at the grand funeral of the lamented Earl—his last appearance in the place before he started in his yacht for a prolonged journey round the world.

As he fixed his dark-blue, earnest eyes on hers, she felt a curious thrill—was it of repulsion, or of inward repudiation of his mute inquiry? She hardly knew—for he spoke, and she had to listen.

"I am glad we meet again," he said, in low, gentle tones which made her feel suddenly sorry, she hardly knew why or wherefore. "I remember two merry little girls swinging together in the garden at Hill House! But I should certainly not have identified you with either of them. Is your little sister here to-night? I suppose she has grown out of recognition, too."

"That is Cynthia," said Beryl, fighting hard to feel and seem her usual self—as Cynthia floated by, waltzing with some dark young man, in contrast with whom she looked fairer than ever.

"Not that girl in white with the golden hair? How very lovely!" Lord St George's deep eyes kindled as he looked after the graceful young creature. "I am afraid you will not keep her long, Miss Dormer! She is certainly the prettiest *débutante* here."

"We shall not keep her long—she is to be married in a few days," said Beryl, somewhat drily. "To whom? Oh, he is the brewer's son at Clayham, John Lambton."

"You did not tell me," began Lord St George,

turning to Roland, who was frowning, for he had not intended to bring in Cynthia and her objectionable marriage until "everything was settled." "I am sure I hope the young man will make her happy," he somewhat lamely proceeded, colouring slightly as he noted his young brother's expression of face. "She seems very young to be married. And now, Miss Dormer, may I hope to have the pleasure and honour of a square dance with you? I never was a dancing man, and had I been, my dancing days would be over now! But there are one or two old friends I must really tread a measure with to-night, and you are one of them."

Beryl allowed him to pencil his initials on her card, then he was claimed by a new arrival, an elderly gentleman, and she and her lover passed on.

"He has chosen the dance before supper," she disconsolately said. "I am to be questioned and cross-questioned and harried and worried—oh! I know! It is of no use your saying he consents to your throwing yourself away upon his land agent's sister! I know better! He is deep—deep as the sea! He has not got those eyes for nothing! You are too shallow, Roland, I tell you, even to suspect what goes on in your brother's mind! But I—well, I felt it. I felt, when he turned and looked at me, that he will be the person who will ruin my life—spoil every chance of happiness—and be the death of St John!"

Roland halted and stared at her amazed. He

thought he knew her, through and through. But he had never seen her thus—he had never imagined she could be vehement, impassioned, unreasonable.

"My dear, dear girl, what is the matter with you? What do you—can you mean?" he asked, his voice betoking his inward consternation.

She gazed at him through rising tears, realising that she had allowed sudden, unaccountable feelings to effervesce, that she had been, in some way, surprised into a most unwonted loss of self-control.

"I don't know, except it is suddenly finding myself here, among all these strangers, in the light and the scent of those plants—there are some perfumes that seem to upset my nerves, and tuberose is one of them—did you not notice we were standing by a perfect bank of tuberoses?" she said, somewhat incoherently, feeling both ashamed of herself and considerably puzzled by such altogether strange, new emotion. "Well, sometimes scent like that gives me horrible headache, but to-night it has made me feel silly, instead. Forgive me!"

He was all remorse in a moment for his transient annoyance.

"Forgive you, indeed, my darling! It is those idiotic gardeners who have to be reckoned with!" he exclaimed. "I suppose their nerves and senses are so obtuse that they have no idea that there are high-strung, delicate beings who can be over-

powered by what they are hardly conscious of. I will take care you do not go near any of those horrid flowers again, to-night!"

"Oh, nonsense! I daresay I should not have felt it if there had not been the anxiety of meeting your brother," she began. "Forget the incident! Let us dance! People are looking at us. Do, pray, let us dance!"

Her tone of voice was harsh, insistent again. He was somewhat taken aback, but at once led her to join the waltzing throng—and after a few turns, the music stopped—and, at her request, he took her through the galleries. She wanted to see the picture her host had brought to her mind.

Meanwhile, Cynthia was enjoying herself as she had never enjoyed herself in her life before. Lady Grayson had introduced a young officer to her at his special request, and after they had danced twice together, Lord St George had come up, claimed acquaintance, and had taken her to the refreshment-room and quite devoted himself to her, adopting a semi-paternal manner, and being unaffectedly interested anent her approaching marriage.

"What will your sister do without you—for the little one at school is no companion?" he asked presently, looking her over with an undisguised admiration which set her pretty, giddy little golden head awhirl.

"Oh! Beryl does not care very much about anything! She is cut out for a lonely life—I am

certain she will be an old maid!" returned Cynthia, gaily. A new sprightliness brought an unwonted light to her velvety brown eyes, a richer carmine to her cheeks and lips. She looked radiantly lovely as she smiled at the Earl across the little table occupied by her empty ice plate and his half-full champagne-glass. "Has she ever had any offers?" She flung herself back in her chair and laughed unrestrainedly. In a less pretty and refined young girl the laugh might have sounded vulgar. But Cynthia's laugh—silvery, like a chime of tiny bells—only made those who heard it glance at her and smile—it was so pleasant a sound.

"My Lord, it is very evident you have been an absentee," she went on. "If you suppose there are any marriageable young men about! I am obliged to put up with a brewer's son. Not that I mind—I am a Radical—but Beryl is such a desperate old Tory, having a brother-in-law like that riles her to exasperation! She is so proud, too, in every way. She wouldn't marry anyone like John Lambton—I do believe she would rather die! But she wouldn't marry above her, to be looked down upon, I know that. To be patronised is gall and wormwood to her, poor dear—and she is so good, one can hardly call it a fault. But really, without joking, if a King Cophetua came along, wild horses wouldn't drag her to play the beggar-maid!"

"So your sister is the very incarnation of pride,

is she?" he asked, smiling. "She must be careful! There is no truer saying than that pride precedes a fall!"

"Why, that was just what I was thinking the other day," she exclaimed round-eyed.

"Great wits jump, don't they?" he said, good-humouredly, as he rose and accompanied her back to the ballroom, where Captain Verner, her first partner, was prowling uneasily about and claimed her eagerly for a promised valse. Then the Earl went off by himself to smoke a cigarette in the conservatory and think over things, as he termed it.

"Pretty, dainty flower—she ought not to languish out her sweet young life among the malt and hops," he mused, as he paced round the plots of tropical trees and shrubs. A few couples were seated about under the glass dome, but he gave them a wide berth and strolled carefully along the outer path. "A pity she has not had better chances. What can have made Dormer in such a frantic hurry to settle her in life, anyhow? And this future sister-in-law of mine—what of her?"

Unconsciously, as he thought of the pure-eyed, stately beauty whose imperial charm had startled him into momentary forgetfulness of everything but herself, he paused before a tall white lily and contemplated it. Stared vaguely at the snowy bloom which drooped at the tall stem top with what seemed to him almost shyness, or proud humility.



"So Miss Beryl is the very incarnation of pride —and the boy has set his heart on her—I have a somewhat difficult game to play," he mused, then he turned, suddenly, glanced at his watch, and finding that ere long he must claim her for that ante-supper dance, left the conservatory.

He had been a trifle taken aback when Roland had come to him with his love tale. Not that he objected to a third matrimonial experiment between the Paulyns and the Dormers, although the two already made were scarcely encouraging—both brides having died young, childless, and unhappy. His instinctive reluctance to the project arose from his experience of Roland's nature. He thought him passionate, impetuous, and generous to a degree—but not one to be chafed or fretted by any ordinary obstacle to happiness in marriage; the very opposite of a husband who would endure the reserve and resentment of a proud, high-spirited wife. As he returned to the ballroom he felt strongly tempted not to encourage the semi-betrothal of his young brother and his land agent's sister. "It seems to me as if it must end in disaster," he mused. He believed that if Roland were not immediately thwarted, the affair would die a natural death.

"My course seems to me to be kind—but to maintain a 'masterly inactivity,'" he told himself. He hoped Beryl was not deeply in love with her handsome young suitor. "She did not look like it," he thought, and the thought comforted and

encouraged him. He would be sorry for the girl, if his neutrality ended in separating them. "But I have my boy to think of," he told himself. The young half-brother had seemed completely his "boy" since the dying stepmother, who been his best friend and his confidant, had gasped out with her last breath, "I leave—Roland—to you."

Beryl, after walking through the picture galleries with her lover, had danced, first with him, then with others. The doctor—a London man—who had been mentioned by St John as having warned him as to his cardiac weakness, was staying for a couple of days' shooting. He was an old-young man who had already "made his pile," and took an occasional holiday. Beryl eagerly encouraged him to sit out a dance with her. She wanted to obtain some opinion from him as to her brother's condition, and she ventured so far as to tell him of St John's attack of faintness and, excusing herself for "talking shop" with the plea of her orphanhood and responsibility as the eldest girl of the family, succeeded in eliciting some sort of statement.

"You are nervous, my dear Miss Dormer, and must really not worry about your brother's health, or, for the matter of that, about anything or anybody," was his grave and somewhat evasive reply, after she had cautiously led up to a leading question. "Remember, self-preservation is our first duty, if not our principal one. Nature has implanted it so deeply in the very core and fount of our being,

that it must be of paramount importance. Perhaps it may be you, or one of your sisters, who will be the first to go—not your brother! It seems such waste of energy to trouble about what may never happen!"

And nothing more definite could be coaxed out of the thin, keen-eyed, gray-haired Doctor Cantelupe. Lord St George came up just as Beryl was feeling worsted and desperate — desperate because Dr Cantelupe's evident caution, his wary evasion of direct replies or statements, encouraged her fears that there was something worse than that which St John had told her hidden from her. She glanced at the Earl with such a curious look in her beautiful eyes as he claimed her for the promised dance that he wondered, and pitied. That hunted look reminded him of some lovely wild creature of the woods suddenly brought to bay.

What could her trouble be? he asked himself, as they silently, almost solemnly, danced the square dance. He made a few remarks—she answered in monosyllables, until he had ceremoniously taken her to the supper-room, insisted on her taking refreshment, and was as ceremoniously taking her back to the ballroom through the picture galleries.

He was wondering how he should open the crucial conversation when she unconsciously afforded him the opportunity. They were walking side by side along the gallery which was

the centre one of three. Portraits by the greater painters of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries frowned, stared or simpered from the walls upon their living descendants. Before one of these, darker than the rest—the velvet doublet worn by the Lord St George it represented melted into the blackness of the background so that the contour of the figure was scarcely discernible, although the rich white lace collar showed against the dark cream skin of the Earl's handsome ancestor—Beryl abruptly halted.

"That is like you," she said, glancing from the picture to her lover's elder brother. "When I saw you in the ballroom I thought so—and now that you are here I see the likeness still more."

He smiled indulgently down upon her. Tall though Beryl was for a girl, Lord St George was taller by a few inches.

"You flatter me," he gently said. "That Lord St George was the cleverest of my ancestors. He discovered a star. At least, he was actively engaged in the astronomer's observatory when the star was discovered, and he wrote a treatise on the subject."

"You are clever, are you not?" she naïvely asked, looking innocently up into his eyes. She thought only of him at that moment, and was therefore natural, untrammelled by self-consciousness.

He laughed. "I am afraid not!" he returned, charmed with her ingenuous expression and almost



childlike spontaneity. "I know nothing of astronomy—although it does not always require science to discover a star! My brother was anything but studious—indeed, he himself says that whatever he knows has been flogged into him. But he has succeeded in discovering—you!"

She started and blushed, but he had paid her the compliment with such respectful adulation that she was confused rather than annoyed, and she made no demur when he proposed that they should pause awhile where they were before "returning to the heat and the noise," as he termed it, and she almost meekly accepted a seat at his side on a crimson divan in the centre of the gallery.

"You see, it is of no use beating about the bush. Roland has told me everything, and I want to talk it over with you, sensibly—for I see you are in full possession of all your faculties, and that I can say more to you than I can to him," he began.

He meant that as a second compliment. But her hypersensitive nature scented some possible hidden depreciation or disapproval. She stiffened—she was on guard at once.

"Everything?" she somewhat curtly asked, edging a little away and giving him a glance of as cool inquiry as any society beauty who was bored with his companionship might have done. "I do not quite understand."

"Roland has told me how he loves you," he

slowly said, finding his task by far more difficult than it had seemed at the onset. "And, perhaps, I was a little surprised at first; but when I saw you to-night, well, I could no longer be astonished. I—I—excuse me if I am abrupt, Miss Dormer—but this sort of thing is so new to me. I am a confirmed old bachelor, as you know, perhaps. Surely that is my reputation in the neighbourhood?"

He paused, feeling more awkward than he would have believed it possible for him to feel. Beryl glanced up at him curiously. She was pale. She believed he was floundering, because he had something unpleasant to say.

"I live very much alone, and do not listen to gossip, my lord," she somewhat distantly returned. "All we know of you personally is that you are an absentee."

"Of course, of course," he hurriedly recommenced, "but I do not matter, really! What I feel and think is of no consequence. But my brother—well, Miss Dormer, when his poor mother died, she left him to me. I feel, now that our father has joined the majority, that I am, to a certain extent, responsible for his well-being. Pray, pray, do not look at me like that—do not misunderstand me—I have but one anxiety, whether you really care for him as he does for you? If you can reassure me on that point, you will indeed make a happy man of me! For, honestly, I am bound up in



the boy. Long ago I found myself and my likes and dislikes such an unutterable bore and nuisance that I, as it were, threw them overboard and began to take part in other people's lives, principally Roland's! Miss Dormer, Roland's happiness means mine; his griefs are mine as well. You will tell me the truth, will you not? You will answer me this. Do you really love him?"

Beryl had listened to his almost passionate speech with a curious sense of unreality. The voice, the words, did not, curiously enough, seem either strange or new. It was as if she had been listening to a repetition of something she had heard long ago, and vaguely remembered. As Lord St George ended his appeal, she came to herself with a start. She looked at him with large imploring eyes.

"You ask me what I cannot tell!" she replied hoarsely. "If love is what they write about in novels, I know nothing about it!"

His heart gave a throb of satisfaction. How "unspotted from the world" this beautiful young creature was! Could he wish for a more fitting wife for his beloved step-brother? Hardly! But, it was a delicate, almost dangerous, situation; he felt that.

"So much the better," he gently said. A strong, almost overpowering, instinct urged him to place his hand encouraging, protectingly, on the clasped gloved hands that lay on that old-

fashioned brocaded frock of hers—a frock which pleased him somehow, so good, yet unpretentious—but he resisted it. She might not understand. "The happiest marriages I have seen are those where the husband adores his wife, and the wife allows herself to be adored! That wife remains her husband's goddess—"

He stopped short, for Beryl turned to him determinedly.

"You asked me, my lord, whether I love your brother—and I cannot say either 'yes' or 'no,' for I have never thought about it," she somewhat brusquely interrupted. "And before I would allow myself to ask myself the question, I must know, not whether you would bring yourself to consent to his wishes, but whether you will join in them honestly! Please understand—if there is anyone else you would prefer as a sister-in-law, I shall say a definite 'no' to him when he speaks to me again!"

"Oh, you must not really do that!" exclaimed Lord St George, distressed, and blaming himself for having "bungled somehow." "Oh, dear, how stupid I must be, not having expressed what I meant! I own up to having been a little startled when he suddenly sprung the idea upon me—you see the last time I saw you and your sister you were little girls—but now, pray believe me that I am certain his happiness or misery is in your hands, and, Miss Dormer, I love the boy more as if he were my own, only son than merely a young



step-brother! Come, do not let any false pride bring about Roland's mental and moral downfall, for, seeing you—feeling certain that you are his one *grande passion*—I fear the consequences of your refusal to be his wife!"

As he spoke—with deep meaning, earnestly—conflicting feelings swayed her. Her colour came and went. But she resisted her softer emotions. She determined not to allow her heart to overbalance her head.

"So, to ensure your brother's happiness, or, rather, possible happiness, my lord, you would sacrifice me?" she began, a little scornfully. "You do not know whether—whether—I myself may not like someone else better than Captain Paulyn! If I did—" she paused; she was speaking because some strange, strong impulse bade her speak; she hardly realised what she was saying—"if I did, if I do, what then?"

She looked boldly into his eyes, then, startled by their shocked, pained expression, felt suddenly scared by her own temerity, and, crimsoning to the roots of her beautiful hair, averted her head.

"Tell me—truthfully—it shall go no farther—I give you my word, it shall not—do you like some other suitor better than my brother?" he asked hoarsely.

She gave a short, bitter laugh.

"I have no 'suitors,' my lord!" she almost resentfully replied, glancing askance at him. She

felt unaccountably irritated, annoyed, and angry with herself at her own unreasonableness. "But, I will tell you this: while you have been speaking I have felt a strange, curious sensation. Something has seemed to tell me not to give myself away in a hurry—not to take it for granted that I like your brother, or shall always like him better than any other man in the whole world! I don't know—I have seen so few people—have lived such a quiet life keeping house for St John! You will tell me whether I am right to wait a little while to see what this feeling means, won't you?"

As she sweetly pleaded, she looked imploringly up into his face; and when he gazed admiringly into her great, innocent eyes he felt a curious thrill. It seemed to him as if his whole being prostrated itself before this childlike, yet proud and stately, girl in a homage which had never been roused in him by a woman before.

"My dear child, understand this—I wish to commit you to nothing," he resolutely said. "I only want you to know that you have my willing consent if you conclude that it will be for your happiness to marry Roland—and that I will do everything that it lies in my power to do to make life easy and pleasant for you both. Meanwhile, tell him that only. Do not make him miserable by creating doubts in his mind. Then—think it over well—to-morrow morning, after you have said 'good-bye' to him—his furlough expires

to-morrow, you know; he must catch the eleven o'clock express—think it over, then; I will call round in the afternoon to discuss the matter with you. Now, I will take you back to the poor boy, who is chafing, I know. You will be kind to him, won't you?"

"Yes," she said, as, following his example, she rose, and they strolled back to the ballroom together, talking of trivial matters. It never occurred to either how exceedingly peculiar was the situation: the Earl pleading his brother's cause to his land agent's sister—and she almost fencing his vicarious suit.

CHAPTER IV

THAT night was a restless one to Beryl. She dreamt uneasy dreams—living through that interview with the Earl in the picture-gallery again and again in a score of fantastic ways.

Rising, in the bright spring sunshine, she felt both unrefreshed and miserable—miserable, because she had almost quarrelled with her only brother the preceding night. He had somewhat peremptorily dismissed Cynthia to bed, and, telling old Gilbert he might retire, had, what he called, "had the matter out" with Beryl in the old hall—and she, being quietly determined not to give way to anyone in an affair which implicated the happiness of her whole future life, had failed to satisfy, or, indeed, to please, him in the least. He had stalked off to bed, suddenly, in one of his quiet rages—and it was a relief to her when, on descending to breakfast, old Gilbert informed her that "Mr St John had gone out riding half an hour ago."

"I wonder where?" she thought, as she lingered over a breakfast which she felt no appetite for, then roused herself as she remembered that Roland



was coming to bid her good-bye, and went off to the offices to give her orders for the day. St John Dormer's establishment was hardly the modest one of an ordinary land agent. His father and mother had been content with a cook and housemaid, and one outdoor gardener, who was also coachman and groom combined, besides the faithful old Gilbert, who represented the indoor male staff. But when St John inherited, he "manned his ship properly," as he termed it. The cook had a kitchenmaid, the gardener an underling, and the stableyard had a coachman with a boy for the rough work — while three other maids made Gilbert's work lighter, if they increased his annoyances, making a butt of him, in the hope of tiring him into resigning his position in favour of a younger man.

While Beryl was in her cool storeroom, gravely discussing the day's food supply with the buxom cook, she heard the smooth roll of wheels, and, with a feeling like a sudden chill, recognised the fact that her lover had arrived, if it had not been established by an impatient clangour of the insistent, loud-voiced, old bell.

"I shall persuade St John to have electric bells; I hate that bell," she thought, as she went into the hall in response to old Gilbert's announcement, "Captain Paulyn, ma'am—in the 'all." She felt intensely averse to the coming *tête-à-tête*. She had had some difficulty to pacify Roland the previous night—to lead him to acquiesce in her

and his brother's conclusion that she must be allowed a few hours, at the least, to "think matters over." What should she say to him to-day? She could not understand herself. She did not love anyone else—she knew that—but she did not believe that she loved Roland, for she would rather he had returned to barracks without seeing her, and that, surely, could not be love!

As she entered the hall she saw him standing, his back to the hearth, a dark figure against the glow of the wood fire. There was a desperate, wild look on his dark, handsome features, which was like a physical blow to her. She stopped short to steady herself. Then she went resolutely forward with outstretched hand.

He clasped it—then his strong, young fingers crept to her wrist, and, closing upon it, drew her peremptorily nearer.

"Well," he said, "are you mine, or not? Tell me! Yes, or no?"

She gasped, and held him away, turning deadly pale. "If you play the highwayman, in the 'your money or your life' fashion, I decline to answer!" she cried. Then, with a sudden wrench, she freed herself from his compelling clasp, and sank back into her own particular chair by the big fireplace.

"Let us talk sense, and be like reasonable beings," she added, trying to smother her inward sensation of mingled anger and fear.

"That is impossible!" he hoarsely returned, kneeling down by her. "Reasonable, when one



loves you? You ask too much! Why, good old St George, one of the quietest, most balanced of men, a perfect machine, without a passion or a real impulse, was unreasonable when he talked of you last night. Talked of you—raved of you would be nearer the mark!"

She sat up suddenly, feeling as if stung to the quick.

"Don't say such things, especially when they are not true!" she exclaimed resentfully. "Your brother is the last man to rave about anything or anybody, and when you speak of him in that way you wrong him!"

"Well, never mind him; he is one of those cut-and-dried human beings who are more like sapless trees than anything else—really, now that he has given me *carte-blanche* to 'go on and prosper,' it doesn't matter!" he impatiently cried. "I want *you*, your love, your kisses, yourself — and by Jove, I will have you!"

His eyes were fierce, his hand, laid on hers, was burning.

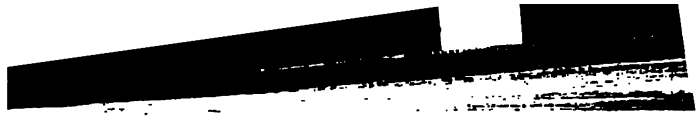
"My dear boy, you are feverish, you are, indeed," she began, suddenly in the full possession of her senses and wits. "Your head is hot," she laid a cool hand on his forehead. "You are not fit to talk, or be talked to. Do I love you? Almost as much as St John, now—I know that! And how my love may grow in the future depends on you. I tell you this, and you may believe me, I cannot admire anything wild and frantic, and

where I cannot admire, I cannot possibly love! If you wait patiently, I don't know what may not happen. Come, dear, be sensible! Write to me. I will answer, everything. But I cannot be hurried into anything. My nature is a slow one. But you remember the old saying, 'slow and sure.' When I can tell you 'I love you,' it will not be for a month or a year, or even a lifetime, but for eternity. If you really care for me, you will not wish to hear me say those words until I mean them. And before I can mean them, I must wait and find myself out! You will wait for that? It is almost a slight to ask you if you will—for if I am worth having, am I not worth waiting for?"

His haggard eyes had been riveted on her face as she spoke. He had listened in a kind of ecstasy, for his passion for her was a consuming one—every hair of her beautiful head had an inestimable value in his eyes—every syllable she uttered was an additional link in the strong chain which bound him to her. When she ended her measured speech, he laid his head down on the arm of her chair, and groaned.

"Beryl, I cannot bear it," he hoarsely said. "I don't see why I should! Tell me that you love me—or, as I kneel here, I will put a bullet through my head before I am an hour older!"

For a few, miserable instants it seemed to her as if her very life had come to an end—despair clamoured at the doors of her soul—she could have shrieked. Then she remembered St George,



his calm, his tender, paternal affection for this "boy" as he called him—and instinct bade her temporise. "He is virtually insane," was her uncomplimentary inward comment.

"No, you will not," she calmly said, laying her chill hand on his. "You will say *au revoir* to me now, knowing that you rank only next to my own dearest in my love, and we will write to each other: and as soon as I think it right to promise myself to you, I will!"

With that he had to be satisfied. He had also to be content with kissing her hand. There was a maidenly dignity about her which literally held him back from taking her in his arms for a passionate betrothal embrace.

"It is better not to have all one's happiness carted upon one in a heap, perhaps," he cynically thought, as he drove away to the railway station a few minutes later. "If she were the most subtly clever woman of the world, she could not allure, attract, and hold me in a very vice better than she does! I shall never care for any other woman, never!"

Meanwhile, Beryl went about her ordinary daily round heavily, feeling strangely bored and disappointed. Her disappointment was with herself.

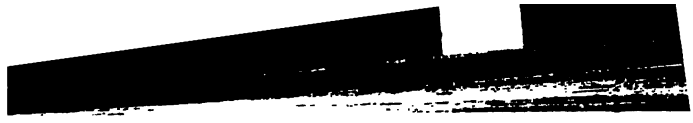
"I must be different from other women and girls," she mused dispiritedly. "The more certain I feel that he loves me, the less I want him to—the more passionate he is the more I shrink from him!"

She was trying hard to forget all about her unpalatable love affair, and to occupy her mind with her various domestic interests, when, as she was standing in one of the pantries, making an inventory of stores, she heard a faint scream. "What was that?" she cried, turning to the cook at her side.

"I'll go and see, m'm," said the woman, hurrying off. The shriek was not repeated, but a hurried pattering of feet came along the stone passage, and a housemaid flew in—livid, staring, her cap awry.

"Oh, m'm, pray come to Miss Cynthia—somethink awful is 'appened," she gasped. "Oh, I don't know what it is, m'm! cook's there, and Gilbert—they'll tell you—"

"Out of the way, girl!" Beryl felt one moment's giddy hesitation — as if suddenly paralysed, unable to speak and to stir—then, pushing the housemaid aside, she rushed along the corridor into the hall.



CHAPTER V

As Beryl rushed into the hall she saw Cynthia—lovely, deadly pale—stretched on the Turkey carpet between the great mullioned window and the billiard-table, her fair, dishevelled head supported by the kneeling, frightened cook, old Gilbert standing by, wringing his hands.

"She were a-watchin' at the winder, m'm, when Mr St John's 'orse—that new bay what he bought three weeks back at Dornton—come a-tearin' by, and Miss Cynthia, she shrieks out, 'He's thrown! he's killed!' and tumbles in an 'eap like—"

"Give her to me, cook; fetch water, brandy, and send for the smelling salts on my dressing-table—Rachel knows—the large cut-glass bottle, and open the door, Gilbert, she wants air!" exclaimed Beryl. Then she seated herself on the floor, and, supporting Cynthia, murmured reassuring words into her ear. The air and sunshine came streaming in as Gilbert set the heavy door wide open. Cynthia stirred, and her eyelids quivered just as the sound of hurrying footsteps were heard on the gravel outside, and the stable-

boy hurried up and stood staring in, eyes and mouth round, panting.

"Well, what is it?" asked Beryl, sharply.

"Coachman wants yer round at the stables, m'm," he stammered. "'E ses as I worn't to say no more 'n that—that 'e wants yer round at the stables. 'E'll give me a good hidin' if I does, so it ain't no use a-arstin of me—not none."

His speech and air betokened iron resolution. At any other moment Beryl would have laughed outright. Now, she merely said, "I'll come," and was looking round for the restoratives for help, when the fat cook and a scared-looking housemaid came in, the latter with a trayful of things, and a young man on horseback trotted up to the open door, dismounted, gave his gray horse into the charge of the stable boy, with a lordly "take him round to the stables," and, stalking in at the door, stopped short.

"Why, what's this? What have you done to her?" he angrily exclaimed, and he went to the prostrate girl, twitched at his knees, and knelt down. He was not ill-looking—fresh-coloured with prim features and complacent eyes and mouth—and his general appearance was sleek and trim, his brown riding suit faultlessly neat. "Brother's horse cantered by without him? Run away while he was in somewhere, of course! She's not a girl to be scared by a trifle, no, no! I expected this, after last night's escapade." He added that in a lower tone, a stab to Beryl. John



Lambton hated Beryl. He knew she considered his marriage with Cynthia a *mésalliance*, while, from his point of view, he thought that the concession was on his side. He had had tough work from the beginning of his courtship to bring his purse-proud father and ambitious mother to consent to his wedding the daughter and sister of Lord St George's land agent. "Leave her to me; I'll bring her to," he added.

Beryl, anxious to learn the worst—the threatening of a "hiding" by the good-natured coachman Holland to the boy Bill, if he said more, had excited her fears—left Cynthia to her lover, and the fat cook, and frightened maid, Rachel, and ran swiftly out and round to the stables, where she found the big, red-faced Holland in his stable-jacket holding St John's recent purchase by the bridle under the big sycamore in front of the stables. As he saw her he touched his recently-wetted hair with his disengaged hand.

"I wouldn't do nothink to the 'oss till you come, Miss Beryl, for I don't know what to make of 'im, and that's a fac'," he began, dubiously, lowering his voice, although, but for the cooing pigeons in the dovecote and a few cawing rooks circling around the elm tops hard by, they were alone. Even the yard dog slumbered in the sunshine, his head on an unfinished leg-of-mutton bone. "'E's been in the river. There ain't no doubt in my mind as to that! Look at the saddle—and 'is mane and tail—and then look 'ere and 'ere"

—he pointed to wounds in the creature's shoulder and flank—"it ain't only spurs as has made them there cuts, but somethink as 'e's come in contact with, like. I tell yer flat, Miss, my belief is as 'e tried 'is best to bolt, and Mr St John, 'e tried to master 'im like, but got chucked for 'is pains. You look jolly well ashamed o' yourself, and no more than you oughter," he added, raising his voice as he apostrophised the wet, shivering creature, whose drooping head and bent legs added to the misery of his half-drowned appearance.

"But—oh, what shall we do?" asked Beryl, in anguish. "He may have hurt Mr St John—he may even be in the river! Oh, Holland, we must send to the Court for help; we must send men on horseback."

"'Ere's Bill! Bill, jest you hitch up Mr Lambton's gray in the stall, and unsaddle the bay 'ere, and sponge these cuts a bit with warm water—you'll find the 'eal-all hointment on the shelf in the 'arness room. You just make your mind easy, Miss Beryl; I'll saddle Nero and be off to the Court."

"No, Holland, I will go myself," she resolutely said. "Bring round Nero for me! I will get them to help me—but you have the brougham ready, and be ready yourself to drive wherever you may be wanted. Oh, make haste! he may be lying somewhere dying for want of help."

"No, no, m'm—Mr St John is a steeplechaser,"



began the old coachman, who had taught the sisters to ride, and was genuinely attached to his beautiful young mistresses—who were such kind friends to his sickly wife, and had stood godmother to all his children in turn. But Beryl had flown before he had had time to utter a reassuring speech—flown, a deadly fear at her heart which spurred her to action, to haste. As soon as she had satisfied herself that Cynthia, lying on a sofa in the hall, assiduously tended by the lover who in a few days would be her husband, was quite recovered from her temporary unconsciousness—she said a few reassuring words to her, and was off to her room—assumed her habit and hat, was down in a flash, mounted on the nettlesome Nero, whose imperious nature had earned him the name, and was trotting swiftly towards the Court.

"He is a good man, and a strong man—he will help me," she told berself, as she fled with instinctive confidence to Lord St George. "Besides, not only am I half engaged to his brother, but poor, dear St John is his steward; he is the proper person to ask to help me!"

Why she had jumped to the worst conclusion at the sight of the half-drowned looking steed and his wounds, she could not have told, but while Holland was speaking to her with bated breath, a horrible sensation had chilled the blood in her veins—a belief that her brother was dead—drowned at the bottom of the fast-flowing river

in one of those treacherous holes of which the village records told such gruesome tales. This weird conviction seemed to overwhelm her as she summoned the lodge-keeper, and rode impatiently in and across the park to the Court. She felt she must tell it, confess it, to Lord St George. "I am sure, certain, he will understand. He will feel that what I dread has probably happened!" she told herself, as she halted at a side door at which equestrians generally alighted, and knocked at the panels with her riding-whip.

"I want to see his lordship at once! Something has happened—will you ask him to come out to me for one moment?" she pleaded, as a man-servant in undress livery opened the door and stared at her, astonished.

The anguish in her beautiful, ghastly face was patent, even to his bucolic understanding.

"His Lordship is with the house-steward in his office, ma'am—I will tell him at once," he said, and disappeared, leaving the door open.

She heard his quick footsteps, then the distant slam of a door. Then there was an intense stillness for a few moments, which seemed to her hours of hideous waste of time. He might be lying dying for want of succour, and everyone lazed, lingered, crawled! She mentally uttered a fervent "Thank Heaven!" as she heard footsteps —quick footsteps—and strained her eyes for the welcome sight of the man in his striped morning jacket. Instead, she saw a tall gray-clad form,

Lord St George came out, looking concerned. In the daylight he looked paler, older—his dark-brown hair was flecked with silver. His eyes were strangely blue in contrast with his bronzed pallor.

"You are in trouble, I fear! Tell me," he quietly said, laying his bare fingers lightly on her gauntleted hand.

"St John went out on a new bay horse this morning, and the horse has come galloping back without him," she began, choking down the emotion which the sight of him, and the comfort of his mute sympathy, had awakened. "Our old coachman says the bay has been in the river, and he is cut about besides. We are afraid he bolted, and that St John is lying hurt somewhere, perhaps even in the river."

"We will not think of that," he exclaimed, his eyes kindling. "We will send off men in every direction, and if you will wait a few moments, you and I will hunt for him together. I will order a single brougham to follow us, with blankets, brandy, and we will have the doctor in the rear. Will that do?"

"Oh, yes, thanks!" The words were commonplace. But the tone in which they were uttered meant volumes. As Beryl reined back and turned Nero's head away from the house, she felt weak, half-suffocated with mingled relief at having found such ready sympathy and succour, and with overpowering dread of the future.

"I am a fool as well as a coward. He may be safe at home at this very moment," she told herself, as she walked the impatient Nero up and down the gravelled drive before that wing of the great white mansion, waiting for the Earl. She saw two or three horsemen and a single brougham start along the drive from the stables, which was a short cut to the high road, before Lord St George came trotting round the corner and halted with a little gesture of his whip.

She cantered up to him, and they trotted off down the avenue of tall limes until they neared the great iron gates, when he drew rein.

"I did not bring a groom for obvious reasons," he gravely said. "Come, tell me all about it, that we may not waste time searching in the wrong direction."

Beryl had so little to tell that the Earl decided to try the Home Farm first, and proposed taking a short cut thither. "If you can jump a ditch or two, or a low hedge," he added. "He would have gone there."

Beryl had hunted sometimes with her brother, and Nero was "fit" in every way for cross-country riding, so that in ten minutes they had traversed the fields which lay between them and Lord St George's home farm and rode in to the stableyard, where the bailiff, a Mr Joshua Penfold, was standing talking to one of his men. As he saw them coming he met them, lifting his hat.

"I expect I know what you've come for, my



lord and Miss Dormer," he began seriously. "I daresay Mr Dormer's right enough somewhere or another—he ain't the sort that can't help himself in an emergency—but this new horse he bought at Dornton a fortnight back came tearing along the lane about an hour back, and took us so by surprise we didn't quite know what to do. However, I went off with a couple of men to the river, and between us we got Mr Dormer's hat; it was caught in between a couple of boulders. Here, Sam, bring that hat here."

As the man came running up with St John's hat, battered and muddy, Beryl gave an involuntary cry like some dumb animal in sudden agony.

Lord St George started, looked anxiously at her lovely, ashen face, and forced himself to smile.

"Come, come, Miss Beryl. A hat is nothing, that is the first thing to go," he cheerily began. "I suppose the bridge is flooded, Penfold? I thought so. I expect Mr Dormer forded the river lower down, and the horse got away as he was mounting the bank, and floundered across again frightened, and made his way back to his stable. The best thing we can do is to ride back to Hill House, perhaps he is there already, then I will return, Penfold, and we can track him. If not back home he is very likely in some cottage, resting, with a sprained ankle or something."

Beryl was too overwhelmed by inward fear and suspense to do or say more. She meekly obeyed,

and let Nero trot by Lord St George's side until they reached the house. The front door stood open, and Cynthia's favourite Persian cat was sitting in the sunshine on a chair within. Beryl sprang down, asked the Earl to hold Nero's bridle, and ran in calling "Gilbert!" "Cynthia!" But the house was as if deserted. She rang the hall bell. Then she rushed back.

"You will wait one minute till I find out?" she cried, almost wildly—then she ran upstairs, meeting no one until she reached the drawing-room, where Cynthia was lying on the most comfortable couch, her lover at her side. She started into a sitting posture as she saw her sister, and gave a pretty little cry of distress.

"Oh, have you found him?" she asked, with picturesquely clasped hands, and round eyes.

"No. I hoped he had come home," said Beryl, miserably.

Young Lambton crimsoned with smouldering anger excited by Cynthia's innocent prattle of Beryl's pride and ambition, and of the revelry at the Court the preceding night in which he had no share, and starting up, went to Beryl as she stood, motionless in her bitter disappointment, in the doorway.

"Pray have a little more consideration for your sister; she has had a most unnecessary shock as it is," he began, with a lofty air and a superior stare. "It seems to me a very absurd fuss to make—surely Mr Dormer is old enough to take care of



himself, even supposing that he has had an awkward spill—"

He stopped short—for Beryl gave him a blank stare and fled. She ran fleetly below, through the still deserted hall, out to the front of the house, where Lord St George sat on his big horse, patiently holding Nero's bridle.

"He has not come home!" she cried. "Oh, do, pray, go back and find him."

"I will do all I can; I am sure you know that," he said, in a sympathetic voice, as he gave Nero's bridle to her. "I will bring him—if I can! And as soon as possible! Meanwhile, as he may have had some accident, I would have a room ready, you know, and everything prepared, in case some little operation should be necessary. I have had my experiences of accidents!"

"I will," said Beryl. And as he rode off on his sleek black charger "Lord Byron" she led Nero quickly into the stable-yard, found that the coachman had driven out upon the road with the brougham, and that only the boy Bill was in charge, and leaving Nero with him to be kept saddled in case he was wanted, returned within to the kitchen, where she found the cook, flushed and excited, brandishing a kitchen spoon, and vigorously scolding the kitchenmaid.

"Them gals makes Mr St John's runaway 'orse an excuse to leave me to do heverything," she exclaimed, staring at Beryl with glassy eyes. "As if there worn't bother enough without them

a-turnin' heverything hupside down. I'm sure I don't know what's for lunch, or dinner, or hanything! Cold jints 'll do to-day? I never 'eerd of such ways in hany place I've hever been in, but there!"

She turned her back on her mistress with a sniff, and Beryl, knowing that when she "took a glass" she was a transformed creature, made allowances in her own mind as she went off to the head housemaid, Barton, and, together with her, made St John's room ready as Lord St George had advised.

The little stir of preparation braced her. But when the bell rang for luncheon, her heart sank. Cynthia asked for hers and John Lambton's to be sent upstairs—and she was thankful for it. To eat was difficult—but to sit at the head of the table and, playing hostess to young Lambton, to pretend to partake of a ceremonious meal, waited on by the trembling, anxious old butler, who seemed scared out of what wits Time had left him, was to her a simple impossibility. She sneaked away upstairs, to the workroom where she had been with Cynthia the day Lord St George's cousin, Lady Grayson, called—and watched the road. The former nursery had four windows, one round the corner, and it was the best room in the house from which to see all approaches—each road that led to the gates.

Here she remained as the slow quarters dragged by, as the afternoon wore slowly through.

At first she was in active mental pain. But as the hours struck, as the shadows lengthened, she began to feel a dulled apathy—to think of all kinds of trivial things — to feel, indeed, as if nothing which could possibly happen would disturb her over-much.

"This is very dreadful," she told herself, as she awakened to the fact that she was under the influence of some unaccustomed torpor—a moral and mental lethargy. "If—if—a carriage drove up—with him dying or dead—I could bear it. Horrible! Yet perhaps this numbness is a special mercy of Providence!"

Just as the dusk began to cast its subtle charm about the landscape, she saw a horseman walk his horse slowly along the high road. Lord St George rode in at the gate.

Her heart gave a dull throb, and she flew downstairs just as old Gilbert met her at the foot of the stairs, and dismally informed her that "his Lordship had come, and there was no news."



CHAPTER VI

"No news?" she asked, pitifully, going up to him where he stood just under St John's portrait, his back to the leaping flames of the wood-fire, whose reflection illumined every polished surface the hall contained, and brightened the fine old hall despite the gathering shadows.

"None!" he returned, sadly. "It is the most extraordinary thing which has happened to me in my whole life! Everything has been done —every corner of the place searched, the holes in the river dragged—and it is just as if he had disappeared into space!"

"Has no one seen him?" she asked—her limbs suddenly failing her. She steadied herself by leaning up against the billiard-table and holding on by one hand.

"No! Nor the horse. The one and only evidence that he was there is the hat."

"It is—very strange," she slowly said, feeling giddy, incredulous, hopeless. "Don't you think so?"

He turned abruptly towards the fire, and almost unconsciously stirred the big logs with his riding-boot. Then he as suddenly turned back.



"Please don't ask me what I think," he said in a curious tone.

She stared at him, nonplussed. Then a sudden, dreadful idea roused her from her semi-stupor.

"Oh!" she groaned. "You think he has killed himself! I know better! Why should he? He has youth, health, plenty of money; he liked his work. Oh, how cruel, how unjust to suspect him of such a crime!"

"I do not suspect suicide," he calmly replied. "I never gave you the slightest reason to imagine that I did!"

"Then what do you mean?" she passionately cried.

"I mean — nothing, dear child," he gently returned, "for I know nothing! Not really— how can I? I am a positive stranger to your brother. I should have to know a great deal of his life before I would dare to form an opinion on the subject of this mysterious disappearance of his—for, honestly, it is that! If he had been in the river and overwhelmed, we should have found him. There is still a chance of his returning with some explanation of the affair. Drowned he is not! Of that one point, I am satisfied!"

"If he is alive, I care for nothing!" cried Beryl, tears streaming from her eyes. "If you only knew what a burden you have lifted from me by saying that you would be glad!"

He took her hand, raised it to his lips, and then gently relinquished it.

"I am glad—thankful—that anything I can say is of some slight comfort," he said. "I do not think you will hear anything further to-night. To-morrow will, I fancy, bring news. If you take my advice you will treat the matter as lightly as you can, and go on as usual. Go to bed and sleep! I will be with you early in the morning. Will you forgive me for venturing to advise?"

"I thank you—with all my heart," she faltered —and in another minute she was alone. He had mounted his horse, and trotted off into the deepening shadows.

It was hard work, in her discouragement, bewilderment, and in spite of Lord St George's encouraging belief that St John was alive, her suspense anent his actual whereabouts and condition, to be patient with the shallow, self-absorbed young couple who spoke of St John with a petulant sense of injury rather than with the faintest shadow of concern. She was thankful when John Lambton, with an annoying assumption of almost marital authority, insisted upon Cynthia's going to bed immediately after an ill-cooked and ill-served dinner had been sneered at by both lovers. Then, with a distant parting recommendation to Beryl to "look after Cynthia—St John could take care of himself," young Lambton loftily rode off homewards.

Beryl passed a sleepless night of uneasy suspense, listening in the stillness for some welcome sound of her brother's return. She pondered,

cogitated, reasoned, wondered, and nothing came of it: not a single satisfactory answer to the reiterated self question—where was he? What could have happened?

With sunrise came a faint, reanimating hope of letter or telegram. Of course, St John might have been found insensible somewhere, and carried off by some good Samaritan to be tended. He certainly must have cards and letters in his pockets. She stood at the hall door watching for the old postman—then, when she saw him fumbling at the gate, she ran swiftly down and took half-a-dozen letters from him.

"Yes, it is a fine morning," she acknowledged, as he touched his cap and went shambling off under the row of pollard elms which screened the house from the road. Then, trembling, she leant up against the gatepost and scanned the letters.

Not one for her! They were one and all for St John, and manifestly business letters. Some looked like lawyers' communications. She was wondering whether, considering the strange circumstances, she was justified in opening them—she had never opened a letter addressed to another person in her life, and felt naturally shy of making a beginning—when she heard footsteps on the road, and starting, glanced eagerly over her shoulder, to meet with disappointment! The footsteps were not her brother's, but those of a tall, soldierly-looking man in ordinary morning dress,

who looked like a non-commissioned officer in mufti.

He met her gaze with a certain vacuity of expression — but, quickening his pace, came up in a few strides, and, touching his cap, said, pleasantly enough, "This is Hill House, ma'am, I believe?"

"Yes, it is," she exclaimed eagerly. "Have you—any news?"

For one instant he looked surprised. Then he frowned slightly and compressed his lips.

"Mr Dormer is at home, I know!" he said, almost rudely, and he attempted to pass her and to open the gate.

"He is not!" she exclaimed, in her most chill and stately manner. "You cannot have come from the village, or you would have heard how his horse came home without him yesterday morning, and we have heard nothing of him, although the whole neighbourhood has been searched, and the river dragged. Oh, and I felt so sure when I saw you that you had come to tell us he was safe!"

The man had stopped short and listened with a sort of tolerant imperturbability as she began to speak, his eyes riveted on her sad but lovely face with a peculiar watchfulness. When she gave that cry of bitter suspense, he glanced away and cleared his throat. Then he looked at her urbanely.

"Let me find him for you, Miss," he insinu-



atingly began. "I can pretty well promise to do it, if you let me have a look round the house! You ladies don't know us men as we really are, you know! A man would find a clue to another man's whereabouts in a minute, where you ladies wouldn't dream of looking, or if you did come across whatever it might be, wouldn't attach no manner of importance to it. Why, you haven't even opened those letters yet!" He eyed them greedily.

"I never open my brother's letters," she distantly replied. Something slighting, familiar in the man's manner, vaguely alarmed her. "And, I am very much obliged to you, but I do not require any further help. If you will call to-morrow, my brother may have returned—unless he is lying too ill somewhere to do so."

The man hesitated and looked her up and down, not unkindly, but as if summoning resolution to continue the interview in a manner satisfactory to himself, but possibly the reverse to this evidently unsuspicious and extremely beautiful specimen of the fair sex — when the sound of trotting was heard by both, a man on horseback came round the corner.

It was the Earl of St George. He came up, dismounted, lifted his hat with a genial "good-morning" to Beryl, then looked inquiringly at the stranger.

"May I ask your business here? I am Lord

St George," he said. The man lifted his hat. "Can I have a few words with your lordship?" he asked, respectfully.

"Certainly," returned Beryl's elected protector. "If you will leave us, Miss Dormer, I will come to you immediately," he said, turning to her. "I presume you have no news?" He also glanced inquisitively at the letters she was holding tightly to her breast, as if she feared they might be wrested from her.

"None!" she despondently returned, and feeling relieved of the responsibility of the strange visitor who came at such an early hour to demand her brother, she returned indoors, and finding breakfast on the table, sent up Cynthia's to her room, and drank some tea standing, as she waited for Lord St George.

She waited. The Dresden china clock on the mantelpiece of the pretty morning-room chimed the four quarters, then struck nine. She paced aimlessly about the sunlit chamber, watching the minute hand as it crept first to five, then to ten minutes past; then, a certain uneasy anxiety anent the soldierly stranger—who, despite his evident respectability of appearance and his assured and important manner, was hardly of her own refined position—drove her into the hall, to the window, which commanded a view of the high road beyond the low garden hedge to the right, the window where Cynthia's pretty brown eyes had been shocked by the sight of her brother's riderless



horse in full pelt back to the stables. From this, Beryl could now have seen the Earl and the stranger in conversation had they been there.

They were not. They had both disappeared.

For a few moments she hesitated, feeling overwhelmed with mingled anxiety and disappointment —disappointment because she had been, she now knew, looking forward all through the long, weary night to the comforting presence and kindly consolation of her lover's elder brother. Then an overpowering impulse sent her flying to the hall-door.

In another moment she stood outside, gazing, peering, listening. It was a fresh, if somewhat chill spring morning. The birds were twittering vociferously on the budding branches of the trees. Beneath, the crocuses were golden patches, firm green hyacinth-trusses were rearing themselves upward between the sheathing leaves. But of human presence there was no sign.

Why were they both gone? Why had Lord St George abandoned her in her plight? she was miserably asking herself when she heard his footstep, which by some subtle instinct she recognised, and assumed a calm she was far from feeling just as he came round the corner of the house.

"I took my horse round to the stables. I want to talk to you," he began, very tenderly. But he was pale; there was a strange, anxious expression

on his well-cut features which accentuated his likeness to the studious ancestor who had written a treatise on a newly-discovered planet.

Silently, her heart seeming to swell within her breast until a knot in her throat produced a feeling of half-suffocation, she led the way into the hall, and seating herself in her chair by the hearth, and drawing another near, mutely motioned him to be seated. At that moment she could hardly have spoken an articulate word.

He coughed, laid his riding whip on the nearest side-table, then went up to her. How frightfully tall he was, she thought. It was like looking up a sheer precipice as he towered above her, seemingly in hesitation.

"Could anyone disturb us here?" he doubtfully asked.

"No one could overhear, if that is what you mean," she faltered, speaking with difficulty.

He glanced around uncertainly, then drew his chair quite near to hers, and seating himself, bent forward.

"Your brother has been awfully foolish," he began in a low tone, "if he had only come to me weeks ago, all this could have been prevented. For, honestly, he is in trouble, great trouble!"

"Oh, where?" she moaned. She had half risen, but he prevented it. "Patience! Listen, and don't be startled or alarmed," he went on.



"I expect Dormer is miles and miles away by this time—safe! It is you who are left to suffer, and bear the brunt of it all. He has evidently been speculating for years past, and not only with his own money, but other people's. His speculations may have succeeded at first, just as a gambler generally begins by winning. But the tide turned, everything went wrong; then he followed, and went wrong too. He used another man's cheque-book. The man, never suspecting him, gave the matter into the hands of the police. The bank did so too. The consequence is that the man you spoke to—a Scotland Yard detective officer—came here this morning with a warrant for his arrest."

Beryl sank back in her chair, pale as a lily. Her white lips trembled, but she did not attempt to speak; her great eyes fixed themselves on St George's, with a mute agony which seemed to him to stab his very heart.

"My poor child—I am killing you," he whispered hoarsely, laying his hands on hers.

She made a violent effort to speak.

"No—no," she gasped, shaking her head. "My poor, poor boy! You must not think him bad. You must not! I beg it, pray it—you must not—shall not!"

"I will not," returned he, emphatically. "No—I will think him mad! Perhaps he was!"

He glanced up at the big portrait that hung over the fireplace, and the fair, handsome face,



with the cynical curl of the well-cut lips, and careless scorn in the large blue eyes, seemed to mock him for saying what he did not think to this unhappy girl.

"He is a splendid-looking fellow, anyhow!" he exclaimed, gazing at her. "Come, Miss Beryl! Pluck up courage, and let us face this trouble together! I give you my word that I will do by your brother just as if he were my own, and leave no stone unturned to help him!"

As by the word "brother," he reminded her of Captain Paulyn—involuntarily, for his mind was absorbed by a sudden and unwelcome revelation he had endured—she shuddered.

"Of course, everything is all over between myself and your brother, Lord St George! This disgrace alters my life—Cynthia's, Pearl's lives!" she cried, bitterly.

"You will think differently by and by, when matters have righted themselves, dear," he said to her, as tenderly as if he were her father. "We will not talk of those things now! What we have to do is to save the name of Dormer from painful publicity, and the first step to take is for us to examine your brother's papers before any search warrant can be put in force."

"Search warrant?" she gasped.

"Search warrant," he repeated, firmly. "That detective, who is now waiting for me within sight of the house, not only holds a warrant for your brother's arrest for fraud and forgery, but one



which enables him to ransack this house. I cannot prevent him—but if you will glance at your brother's papers we might burn or put aside anything incriminating! Where are his keys? With him? He keeps all his papers in a safe in his study?"

"He had a larger one lately, with a lock which no one can open unless he knows the clue—a word or something," said Beryl, revived as she imagined the discomfiture of the detective.

The Earl gave a sigh of relief.

"Thank Heaven for that small mercy!" he devoutly said. "And now, my child, is there no one to whom you and your sister could go until matters are settled? This is my idea: you two girls go to relations, or old, tried friends, for a week or so—for, of course, your sister's wedding will be postponed in any case—meanwhile my lawyer shall stay here in possession, and I will go to and fro to see that your interests are strictly cared for! What, you will not go? Why not?"

"If the captain jumps overboard, ought the first mate to leave the ship?" she asked almost scornfully. "My Lord, I thank you with all my heart and soul for your goodness to me; but I must stay here."

Although St George had made up his mind that the two girls should leave Hill House for the immediate present, he felt that unless he betrayed certain facts which he intended to keep from Beryl,

she would not forsake her post. So he waived that point.

"I am afraid you may have a good deal of unpleasantness to endure," he gently suggested. "You do not mind? You may not; but there is your sister to be considered. Your servants are doubtless everything they should be. But they are human! They will not enjoy being watched by the police. Few persons would! Then there are these Lambtons. If Mr Lambton, the father, is at all the kind of man people say he is, your sister will scarcely marry his son! Would it not be far better if she were away?"

"Cynthia can go, and welcome!" she began—when she gave a slight start. There were sounds of a horse's hoofs on the drive outside. "I believe that is John Lambton," she added, shrinking, just as the hall bell rang. "What shall I do?"

"Leave him to me," he said, stoutly. "Go to your sister, and break as much to her as you think she can bear. Then wait until I send up to you. I will do my best."

"I—know," she miserably said, just as Gilbert came in with more than his usual stoop and halting gait.

"Shall I let whoever it is in, m'm?" he asked, his white head drooping. He seemed to have aged years in a few hours.

"If it is Mr John Lambton I will see him, Gilbert," said Lord St George.



"Very well, my Lord." The old man went to the door. As Beryl glided out of the hall she heard John Lambton's strident voice asking pompously for his betrothed.



CHAPTER VII

BERYL went upstairs, dazed and miserable, to find Cynthia elaborately dressing her hair before her toilet-glass.

"I never knew my hair so tiresome before," she petulantly exclaimed, as her sister entered, taking up a large silver-framed hand-glass and turning her dainty fair head all manner of ways as she consulted it. "It is always like that! If one thing disagreeable happens, a lot of others are sure to follow. I said that to Jack last night, and he tried to laugh me out of the idea; and now, just look at my hair! I can't get those puffs to match. Good gracious! What's the matter? Hasn't St John come back?"

"No," said Beryl, as solemnly, as meaningly as she could speak, leaning against the shuttered recess of the old-fashioned window, and gazing gravely at the pretty, pettish face, with the bewitching brown eyes and soft, red lips. "I do not think he will, Cyn, until he is out of a threatened trouble. It has to do with money. But Lord St George will see us through if he can. He has been here. His goodness is marvellous!"

"Lord St George? Money? Oh, what non-

sense! As if St John can want money!" exclaimed Cynthia, contemptuously. "When he is going to advance me my dowry, or a good deal of it, and the settlements are waiting to be signed! where is your common-sense, Beryl?"

"Gone!" exclaimed Beryl, passionately—and the eyes which met Cynthia's sent the blood flying from her delicate cheeks, they looked so lurid, wild. "I seem to have no reason left, Cynthia, after hearing what I have heard about St John!"

Cynthia trembled, leant back in her chair, and gazed at her sister, horror-stricken.

"He has run away with somebody!" she gasped, half in interrogation, half almost assertively.

Beryl shook her head, and gazed pitifully up through the square, Georgian window-panes at the pale spring sky. It seemed so dreadful—the truth about her brother, and her sister's ideas.

"How shall I tell you, poor dear?" she hoarsely said, looking into Cynthia's frightened eyes, brown and soft like a startled doe's, with intense compassion. "St John has not been as well off as he seemed—he has gone so far as to forge other people's names on cheques—"

"Beryl — you are mad!" hissed Cynthia, staggering to her feet, and staring angrily at her sister. "You must be mad—you look mad—our St John, indeed! Our St John a forger? Oh, how dare you repeat such a wicked lie!"

At that moment Beryl, glancing out of the window, saw the detective leisurely pacing to and fro on the high road. Calming herself with an effort, she took Cynthia's hand, and pulled her gently to the window.

"You see that man there?" she quietly asked. "He is a detective. In his pocket he carries a warrant for St John's apprehension on charges of forgery and theft, also a search warrant. If Lord St George had not happened to come, he would be now, at this moment, ransacking the house—"

Beryl stopped short, for, with a groan, Cynthia staggered back and fell on the floor in a dead faint. Beryl, exercising all the strength she could command, was half-dragging, half-lifting her sister upon the big sofa at the foot of the bed, when there was a tap at the door, and Barton, the tall, gaunt housemaid, appeared.

"Oh, lor'!" she exclaimed, as she saw the fainting Cynthia. "Not that it ain't best for 'er, poor dear; them above only knows! I'll get 'er to, Miss, if you'll go down to 'is Lordship—'e wants you partikler. Mr Lambton's gone, but he ses to me, 'e ses, don't you say so, there's a good soul—you just tell Miss Beryl I want 'er at onst, immediate, that's wot 'e ses. You go to 'im, ma'am—I'll see after Miss Cynthia—only send up one of the gals, there's a dear lady, to fetch and carry—"

Beryl gave her a distracted glance, rang the bell, a long peal, and fled—telling herself as she went

that if the man who in a few short days from thence had intended to make Cynthia the partner of his joys and sorrows had deserted her in her hour of anguish, it hardly mattered if her fainting fit were prolonged to almost any extent.

She rushed downstairs and into the hall—then, seeing Lord St George standing under St John's big portrait, his back to the hearth, pale, but absolutely composed and seemingly at ease, she checked herself, and striving to imitate his imperturbability, went slowly to him.

"Mr Lambton has gone?" she asked incredulously. "He could not, if he wanted to, have seen Cynthia! She fainted. No! I can trust Barton with her. I will not go back until I know —the worst!"

"The worst may really prove the best," he reassuringly began, as she leant up against the billiard-table, resolutely facing him. "I can assure you—you see I have some experience of my kind, my sex—your sister has had a lucky escape! Mr Lambton, junior, is hardly of the stuff heroes are made of. He was simply scared out of his wits when he heard of the character of our troubles"—he purposely used the word "our," to comfort her with the idea that she was not standing alone to face her foes—"he made me smile in spite of my disgust, he ran off so like a frightened rabbit 'to consult his father.' I really think myself that if your sister can make up her mind to dismiss him, it would be of all things the very



best! But—if she really cares for the young man, I will ride over and see this heavy father the *jeune premier* of the drama stands in such awe of!"

He spoke lightly—because the crisis of the fortunes of these unhappy girls was so very grave, he felt it could be best met with a light-hearted daring, rather than with courage born of serious thought. "If they realise their position, they are lost!" he had told himself, after John Lambton had rushed away as from a plague-stricken place, and he was awaiting Beryl.

"No—a thousand times no!" she cried, her eyes aflame, her cheeks crimsoning. "Lord St George, if it is necessary, I will kneel to beg and implore you not to do it!"

"It is certainly not necessary even to ask me not to do this or to do that for you—I am simply your slave, to obey your lightest behest, to wait upon your wishes, before they are expressed if possible," he almost tenderly returned, in his reverence and compassion for this sore-stricken young creature. "Of course I will not go if you do not wish it!"

"I shall do my utmost to persuade Cynthia to jilt the young man before he has had time to insult us by jilting her," she said, determinedly. "And if she feels she cannot, I shall carry her off bodily, and accept your Lordship's generous offer to protect our affairs until the worst, whatever it is, is over! What will they do, by the way, if they do not find my poor brother?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Honestly, I don't know," he replied. "I should say—nothing! My hope for you is that Dormer has made good his escape. But we won't talk of complications. Things which are at their worst, or seem so, often right themselves in an almost miraculous manner. What I want to know is—what good relation or kind friend you have who would take care of you two girls until disagreeables have blown over?"

Beryl knit her pencilled brows, and leant her round, fair chin on one hand, the other supporting her elbow, in an unconsciously expressive pose.

"I was thinking hard in the night," she began, ruminatively. "And perhaps you will kindly give me your advice—for really I know so little of life, of the world, of human beings, and you know, it seems, so much! My father had a younger brother who went into the Church—and before his death we used to visit this uncle in his country parsonage, and he and his wife—they have no children—stayed here once or twice. But about a year after the dear dad died, St John quarrelled with Uncle Bernard, and since then I have not seen them, nor do I and my aunt write to each other. But both uncle and aunt send cards on our birthdays—not to St John, but to us girls! Do you think they would have us for a time?"

"I am sure they would!" he emphatically

returned. "Write off at once! Don't say anything about legal trouble — detectives, you know, or anything of that sort! Merely say that your brother has gone away—you don't know where he is—but you think his affairs are complicated, and that I wish you to go away for a time, so that I may have a fair field and no favour to see everything arranged. Will you do that? shall I jot it down for you?"

"Please," she obediently said, in a grateful tone. As he tore a leaf from his pocket-book and wrote on it with his stylographic pen, she stared at him in a sort of dull, unbelieving stupor. Was he real? Was he a man? If St John, Jack Lambton, and—yes—Roland Paulyn, too—were men, how could Lord St George be a man, also?

"There," he said, cheerfully, handing her the slip. "I feel very impertinent, drawing up a letter from you to your aunt, and, of course, I don't suggest you should copy it verbatim. I only want you to see in black and white what it is expedient you should say, and what you should leave unsaid! And now I will go back home for a little while. I will see one of my lawyers about taking up residence here during your absence, and I will write to Roland and break matters to him— What? I am not to do so?" He glanced at her astonished, as she gave a cry of dissent.

"No, Lord St George," she bitterly said. "Please—wait—until—I am gone!"



He paused a moment—then seemed about to say something—paced the hall uncertainly—and once more faced her.

"I said—you were to dictate, I would obey!" he half reluctantly began. "So I must stand by my undertaking! But—you will write at once? You will pack, to be ready to start?"

"You are in a hurry to get rid of us!" she exclaimed, with a faint smile.

"Perhaps, in my foolishness, I may be," he returned, regretfully. "But, pray, do believe it is only the outcome of a strong feeling of mine that your sex should be spared business details, especially when they are sordid and unpleasant! *Au revoir!* I rely upon your sending for me, should any difficulty occur, any unforeseen complication arise. You will—won't you?"

"I will," she asserted, as he snatched up his hat, and deprecating her suggestion to send to the stables, went out to seek his steed himself.

She stood looking after his tall figure as he strode off with a vigorous step. Standing on the sunny doorstep, and shading her eyes with her hand, she smiled as she looked after him. But why she smiled at such a crisis—why she suddenly felt light-hearted, as if she had come to terms with fate, or that her troubles were more a mirage coined by an apprehensive mind rather than fact, pure and simple, she could not have told.

She did not smile long. Just as she turned,

with a sigh, to go back to her somewhat anomalous duties within doors, leaving the outer sunshine, sweet, perfumed air, and calm, untroubled natural scenes for the perturbation of human complexities, she met the tall, gaunt Barton.

"Please, 'm, Miss Cynthia wants Mr Lambton; nothing won't pacify her but Mr Lambton," she began quite distractedly. "I thought 'is Lordship was in the 'all, m'm! Pray, where is he? 'E might fetch Mr Lambton, mightn't 'e?"

"I will go to Miss Cynthia," cried Beryl; then, thanking the anxious woman for her care of the girl to whom she was about to deliver, what to her in a like case would have meant a death blow, she recommended her to go about her ordinary duties, and betook herself to her sister's bedchamber, feeling like an unwilling executioner.

"Heaven help me!" she mentally exclaimed, as, nearing Cynthia's room, she heard a subdued crying and moaning. Then a swift remembrance of something she had read somewhere about the supreme benefit of a counter shock in hysterical cases produced by unpleasant news, she opened the door, closed it, and went up to the couch where Cynthia was sobbing, writhing, and incoherently apostrophising her "Jack."

"Oh, Jack, do come!" was the burden of her song, a theme singularly inappropriate, as it happened.

Beryl paused, shuddered, then going desperately to the sofa, knelt down, and encircled the



graceful, restless form lightly, caressingly, with her arm.

"Darling, I have bad news for you—be brave, and bear it, for all our sakes!" she began firmly. "John Lambton was here, but when he heard that St John—that we all—were in trouble—he rushed off—he left us—he would have nothing to do with us!"

For a moment or two Cynthia was motionless, silent as a stone effigy. Then abruptly she sat up, tearless, calm, staring angrily at her sister.

"You sent him away! You told him what you told me!" she hissed. "Oh, how wicked, how cruel!"

"My dearest child, I never even saw him!" exclaimed Beryl, too miserable, too sorry for her pretty, outraged sister to resent the accusation. "It was Lord St George who broke the affair to him as gently as possible. Cynthia, he is worthy the name of nobleman—he is our staff, our stay; he means to see us through everything! He does not mind what he does! He told me simply to dictate to him—he would be our willing slave. He insisted upon seeing your John, but nothing he could say or do was of any avail! Your John ran away in a panic, 'to consult his father,' he said."

Cynthia's eyes, strangely glittering at first, roving wildly around, had softened as Beryl spoke. The Earl was playing the *rôle* of friend in need—the Earl had wished to disclose the facts of the

case to her bridegroom, the brewer's son—with the result that the brewer's son ran away. What did that point to? She remembered Lord St George's adulation, sympathy—the unmistakable admiration in his deep eyes that never-to-be-forgotten night of the ball—a ball which did not include such persons as the local brewer's son, who had dared to cheapen her in Lord St George's eyes by forsaking her in the crucial hour of her sore need.

"He—Jack—said that?" she cried, leaning back and gazing at her sister. "The viper! The horror! Beryl, I have done with him!"

"I knew you would say that. Oh, Cynthia, Heaven bless you for this, and you will be blessed!" exclaimed Beryl, solemnly. "You are a true Dormer, just as Lord St George is a true Paulyn! And now—shall I tell you what Lord St George's ideas are—as to what we should do?"

"Whatever they are, I shall obey them," said Cynthia, devoutly.



CHAPTER VIII

THE two girls—Cynthia, with her peculiar elasticity, seemingly none the worse for her nervous breakdown—were busily—Cynthia almost gaily—preparing for their departure, when the reply came to a telegram Beryl had thought best to send to her uncle at Deepdale Vicarage.

"Something has happened which makes it better for us to leave here for a week," she had wired. "Can you take Cynthia and myself in?"

"Most certainly," ran the reply. "Come as soon as possible—the sooner the better."

Beryl, pleased and thankful, had handed the fateful answer to Cynthia, when she caught sight of Barton, who had brought it, beckoning to her with mysterious blinks and gestures.

"I will go down and glance at Bradshaw, so that I can wire which train they can expect us by," said she. "Go on with the sorting, dear, will you? I won't be long."

She went out and closed the door, with inward dread of the detective, or perhaps another one, with more "warrants." She was relieved when Barton said, "Mr Lambton wishes to see you,

m'm—the old gentleman. He said Miss Cynthia was not to know; 'e come by the back way, and wouldn't go to the 'all or droring-room, so I just took him to Mr St John's study, and left 'im there."

"Very well," said Beryl. "Tell him I will come." She waited a few moments to see that Cynthia was relieved in mind by her uncle's timely help, also to recover from her slight dismay when she knew she had to face a man whose smug self-satisfaction and semi-patronage of them had often exasperated her; then she betook herself to the study, a room opening into the hall, which St John used as office and sanctum, and where he transacted all business.

As she entered, she faced the plump, sleek old man with the bristly gray hair, slits of eyes, loose, thin-lipped mouth, hawk-like nose, and pendulous cheeks. She had always thought him repulsively plain—but to-day his face looked hideous, more like a gargoyle than a human visage.

"You have come—?" she began, tentatively, standing just within the closed door, and without preliminary greeting or civility.

"To bring your sister a letter from my son," he pompously returned, drawing an important-looking square envelope from his breast pocket with his tightly-gloved hand. "It was a shock, I may say, a very great shock to us all, Miss Dormer, to find that we have had so narrow an escape from sullying a name which has hitherto stood as high



as ours has, with that of a man who has laid himself open to legal prosecution. Lord St George said very little to my son—he naturally wished, as far as possible, to screen an employé he has evidently trusted far too much—but he himself did not profess to deny that your brother is a ruined man—most probably an absconding bankrupt. Under these circumstances I must withdraw my consent to the projected marriage—"

"Stop!" cried Beryl, in clear, resonant voice. "My sister is writing to-day to release your son from his engagement!"

The brutal, gargoyle expression on the old man's face softened a little. He coughed, then gave a spasmodic grin.

"Your sister has behaved very properly! Of course I exonerate her from all blame in the matter, and we wish you both well," he went on, haltingly. "Under the circumstances, I will retain this letter; it is quite the right thing that the release should come from her."

"No!" said Beryl, stubbornly. Wrath and disgust, together with wounded pride, raged in her young, rebellious soul. She set her back against the door, and her eyes gleamed dangerously in her pale face. "I want that letter, please! Nor do you leave this room by fair means until I have it!"

"Tut, tut, there is no necessity to treat me to such virago airs—although almost anything may be expected from your brother's sister," returned

Mr Lambton, vindictively. While he was "rid of the crew," as he termed it, his exasperation at having had his name publicly coupled with theirs knew no bounds. "Tell me what you want it for—since its object seems to have been attained before it reaches your sister—and perhaps I may think fit to give it you."

"Unless you give me that letter, I shall insist upon Cynthia's holding your son to his engagement," said Beryl, calmly.

The brewer began to bluster. He had found blustering "pay," as he called it, especially with weak women and cowardly men.

"Insist, indeed! What insolence!" he exclaimed, in a hectoring manner. "Let me out of this, girl, and at once, or, by George! I will let people know the sort of women you are! D'ye hear?"

He advanced a step or two, and glared at her without pretence of concealment of his intense hatred. She smiled.

"Keep your letter, Mr Lambton, if you prefer it," she said, in a sweet voice which the brewer told himself "would have got her ducked or burnt in bygone times." "But remember, that should my sister wish to prosecute your son for breach of promise—I cannot tell yet whether that is her intention — she has numbers of incriminating letters to fall back upon, besides the fact that the marriage has been publicly announced to take place in four days from this."

The brewer flinched as he glared at her. Then he gasped, and turned dangerously purple. For a few moments they faced each other—the strong old man, backed by his importance in the county, his wealth—and the weak girl, worsted by Fate in her cruellest mood. But the old man was the one who cowered, as she gazed full at him with her clear, candid eyes.

"If I give you the letter—will you sign a declaration that your sister will not disgrace herself by proceeding against my son? Not that she can have a leg to stand upon in the opinion of any respectable jury," he spluttered. Agitation had thickened his speech, just as hatred had weakened his generally ready wits.

"No," she returned, emphatically. "Give me that letter—a letter which will heal any regret my sister might otherwise feel, a letter which will convince her that she has been within an ace of marrying a heartless wretch—and I will give you my word that you and yours will never be troubled by any of us again! Keep it—and I hold myself neutral. If she wishes to publish her wrongs to the whole world, I shall not stir a finger to prevent it!"

He listened—considered—frowned. Then he flung the letter on the floor at her feet with a blood-curdling oath. "Let me pass," he stormed—and with a condemnation of the whole establishment to the nether regions, he stuck his hat on his head, and stalked out.

She stared after him with a curious, choking little laugh. Then she resisted her half-hysterical inclination to laugh and cry together, and, picking up the letter, determined to read it before she gave it to Cynthia. "She has taken it all so well, I must spare her everything I can," she thought.

The letter in Jack Lambton's uneducated-looking scrawl was brief, but to the point.

"DEAR CYNTHIA," it ran—"Of course I am awfully sorry that your most deceitful and designing brother has ruined you all, and you may command my friendship, in private, of course, for life. Indeed, I shall always remember our pleasant times together with regret. But, publicly, we must part for ever. The name of Lambton must not be sullied by contamination with one which is to be associated with bankruptcy, and worse! Good-bye, Cynthia, and may Heaven bless you.—Your true well-wisher,

"JOHN LAMBTON.

"*P.S.*—I hope some suitable man may come your way, and make you happy. I myself shall shortly marry according to my people's wishes.

"Miss CYNTHIA DORMER."

"Poor lamb!" mentally cried Beryl. "And I have to take her that—from the man who in four days was to have been her husband! What shall I do? What can I do?"



She paced the small, square room with its reminiscences of the brother who was the active cause of trouble—the new safe let into the wall—the shelves of books on farming, agriculture, beasts, birds, and the rest—the almanac of the year, and the old, flyblown map of the county—the foxes' brushes and heads—the stuffed toy terrier which had been her father's last pet—glass cases of extraordinary trout caught in that fast-flowing river where St John's hat had been found—and again and again asked herself how she should deliver that letter to Cynthia.

"If it had been written—to me—by Roland—it would have killed me!" she told herself. And then and there she resolved never, come what might, be Roland as noble and generous even as his brother the Earl, would she hear another word of love from him.

"We—the Dormers—would 'contaminate' the Lambtons," she bitterly thought. "How much more we should 'contaminate' the Paulyns! No—*that* is all over! I will write to Roland—a letter which will preclude an answer of any sort or kind—which will end everything between us. Meanwhile, I have this horrid, inhuman insult to deliver to that poor, innocent, outraged darling! Heaven help me!"

Just as she inwardly apostrophised Heaven for help, the door opened, and Cynthia came in, glancing round. Instinctively, Beryl thrust the



letter into her pocket. Cynthia was pale, red-eyed, but composed.

"Mr Lambton has been here," said she, bitterly. "I saw him go! Don't speak! I know what he came for! To break it all off! He was too late! I have just sent off my letter to Jack, saying 'good-bye for ever — good riddance!' Don't let us speak of those people again, Beryl! I have done with them!"

Thus it came that the letter reposed in Beryl's pocket until she locked it away in a secret recess of a locked despatch-box. "Poor child! She takes it so bravely that I have not the heart to show it her," she told herself pitifully, as she laid her head on her pillow that night.

Not to sleep. She lay wondering what would become of them all, and listening to the eerie sounds about the house, through the dark, gusty night. There was a gale, and the wind howled and moaned about the tall chimneys, and set the trees swaying with creaking and shuddering sounds. But Beryl was glad to lie awake. As the hours went by, her inward perturbation calmed, and she seemed to see her future as it ought to be.

Her brother was ruined—and he had tried to ruin others. That was clear. So she felt that she and her sisters were beggars, and must behave as such.

Everything must be sold. She resolved to retain nothing but their wardrobes and a few

trifling trinkets which had been gifts to them, or had belonged to their dead mother.

If their uncle—the stern but righteous man—offered them a home, she would accept it for Cynthia, whom they might possibly adopt, and for Pearl during her holidays. "I must go out as governess, or companion, or old people's nurse, or something, and help keep Pearl at her school," she determined. Meanwhile, she meant to say no word of any of this to anyone but her uncle. She would write to Roland when they were domiciled at the vicarage. "Above all, Lord St George shall not know," she thought. She felt he would prevent her plans—that he would have no sympathy with them.

Next morning was wet and dreary. The wind had lulled—evidence of the force of the gale was to be seen by the branches torn violently from the trees in the garden. The two girls were breakfasting, ready for their drive to the station, in the hall near the blazing log fire—their luggage had already gone on in the light cart—when a brougham drove up to the door, and Cynthia ran to the window.

"It is Lord St George and an old gentleman with white hair!" she excitedly exclaimed, and, all blushes and smiles, she ran to the door and ushered them in.

Lord St George gave Beryl a steady look as he went to her and took her hand. He thought she looked ill, if more beautiful than ever,

with those luminous eyes surrounded by bistre rings.

"This is my solicitor, Mr Burrage, who will take charge of everything here for you, Miss Dormer, while you are away," he said. Then he introduced both girls to the benignant-looking old man, and glanced at his watch. "I am afraid you have no time to tell Mr Burrage the ins and outs of it all—in fact, if you are to travel by the ten train we had better get on at once," he went on. "But I will return and establish you here, Burrage, if Miss Dormer will authorise me to do so."

He looked inquiringly at Beryl, and she gave him a grateful glance. As he told her aside that he thought the fact of his escorting them publicly would "put an end to any silly gossip," she acquiesced in the dismissal of their own carriage, which had just driven up to the door, and she and Cynthia drove to the station in Lord St George's brougham, with the Earl seated opposite to them.

Was it to avoid serious talk with herself that he seemed absorbed in Cynthia's half-lively, half-foolish remarks? Beryl wondered as they drove rapidly to the station. Perhaps! Still, he seemed to gaze with a certain astonished admiration at the fair girl, who, although suddenly bereft of lover and projected wedding, and under a dismal cloud, had never looked brighter or prettier, or had prattled more amusingly, if

inconsequently. And at the station Lord St George seemed chiefly concerned about Cynthia —that she should have the least draughty corner of the carriage, etcetera. Beryl had meant to travel third—but dared not refuse the first-class through-tickets handed to her by her friend in need.

"You must take care of each other, mind!" he cheerily said, standing on the step at the last moment, and glancing from one to the other. "And I expect to hear from you both—every detail! Unless I get full and particular accounts I shall not write long letters in return!"

Then the whistle sounded, and he sprang down with a wave of the hand. They were off! Cynthia sank back, pink-cheeked, smiling, with a long sigh.

"That man is an angel!" she enthusiastically cried. "What a happy woman his wife will be!"

"My dear child, he is a confirmed old bachelor!" said Beryl, feeling unaccountably annoyed with Cynthia's "frivolity," but almost simultaneously chiding herself for not being glad and thankful that the younger sister who seemed ages her junior, although barely three years had elapsed before Cynthia seconded her in the nursery, was able to keep up her spirits after their unexpected troubles.

"Is he?" said Cynthia, half-contemptuously. Then she spoke of other things, and Beryl strove



for patience, comforting herself with the reflection that for the future the Paulyns and the Dormers would have an impassable gulf between them—St John's conduct—although why the thought soothed and consoled her she would have found it hard to say.

While the sisters were steaming away into the unknowable future, Lord St George drove back to Hill House, leaning gloomily back in his brougham, his arms folded, his eyes staring at vacancy.

Arrived there, he had a lengthy interview with the old lawyer, Mr Burrage. Indeed, so long was his stay that the coachman dozed on the box, and the footman stole to a corner, and, over a proffered mug of Lambton's dinner-ale, discussed the situation with the old coachman, Holland, who "couldn't make it out at all, nohow," as he repeatedly said, shaking his head.

After establishing the lawyer at the head of affairs, which meant interviews with the head servants, who were scarcely enthusiastic, but very ready to "oblige his Lordship," Lord St George had his final word alone with his legal adviser.

"Above all, come what may, Burrage, those girls are not to know, are never to know, you understand!" he emphatically said. "If it costs me double and treble what it will probably cost, I don't care—I feel so strongly on the subject. The innocent shall not suffer for the guilty! That, I am determined!"



The old man sagely shook his head.

"Ah," he sententiously said, "if I may be permitted to amend that proposition, I should say that those particular persons are not to be allowed to suffer, my Lord," he slowly said. "Someone is sure to suffer! Perhaps it may be your Lordship. Who knows?"

Lord St George laughed. "There is not much chance of that, Burrage, I fancy," he returned. "*Au revoir!*" and he went out, roused the dozing Jehu, and drove off.

Mr Burrage gazed after the vehicle, and shook his head. "I am afraid this is a very bad job indeed!" he thought, with something akin to consternation.



CHAPTER IX

THE two girls had a lengthy journey, changing trains twice, to reach the pretty Gloucestershire valley which was their clerical uncle's present abode. Deepdale was new to them—Mr Dormer had been transferred to that incumbency since their father's death—and as the train went steadily uphill for awhile, between richly-wooded slopes, where the copses suddenly ended now and then, and some fertile fields surrounding a rural farmstead would come into view, Beryl, for one, felt an arousing of her sympathy with every natural beauty. It was with intense pleasure that she gazed at the red, slanting rays of the winter sun glinting on the bleached trunks of the silver birches—which stood in pale relief with their feathery branches of myriads of slender twigs against the sturdy, dark-green firs—or watched them lending a rosy tint to picturesque thatched cottages or old wooden barns.

"How lovely this is!" she said to Cynthia, who was gazing out on the opposite side.

"Lovely?" Cynthia gazed blankly at her sister. "Horrible, I call it. Savage! Just



like uncle to bury himself in a place like this! Thank Heaven we shall not be here very long! Lord St George will see to that!"

She leant back with a contented little smile, and a half-satisfied, half-petulant shrug of her graceful shoulders. Beryl, astonished at her sanguine confidence in the Earl, was about to expostulate, and, at least, to hint to her that she was not to build her hopes upon improbabilities, but to take the goods the gods gave her and be thankful, when a sudden rush of sisterly pity and sympathy checked her.

"Poor girl! orphaned, betrayed, and outraged by her only guardian, her only brother—insulted, forsaken by the man who was literally her bridegroom, I should be heartless, cruel, to say one word to mar her cheerfulness," she told herself. "I ought rather to admire and imitate her spirit. It is resignation, after all! I am sure uncle will be delighted with her way of bearing her crosses!"

She gave Cynthia a tender glance, and stared out of the window seeking for more and more beauty to admire and to console her wounded susceptibilities with. But the last gleams of sunshine were gone. The woods were darkening, mysterious in the gathering dusk. An unaccountable depression succeeded her transient enthusiasm. She was glad when the train rolled downhill into a station with twinkling gas-lamps, and she saw the name of the town where they would, in all probability, be met by their uncle.

She seized their bundles of wraps, and, succeeding in opening the door, alighted, and looked round. Her uncle's tall, spare figure was not to be seen, but as she looked towards the luggage-van, followed by the audibly complaining Cynthia, someone stepped out from the shadow—a man-servant in livery.

"Joseph!" she exclaimed. "Is it really you?" She felt delighted to see the odd, dark, familiar face.

"It are, Miss Barrel," he heartily returned. "But Lor'! This ain't Miss Cinthy? It's 'er face, but Lawd! how you've growed, Miss! The bye is with the 'oss—the master had a sick cull. Is your luggage there, Missies? You jest go down, Miss Barrel, I'll see to it all for ye."

But although Beryl felt comforted by the sight of a face, more or less familiar to her since her babyhood, she and Cynthia went to the van, claimed their luggage, and followed it down to the yard, where a dogcart and a small pony-cart were in waiting in solitary grandeur.

"We don't keep a close carriage now, Miss Barrel, but Missis 'as sent an 'eap of rugs and shawls," explained Joseph; and he wrapped his master's nieces up with as much care as that with which he used to pack them into their donkey-panniers in infancy. Joseph was of gipsy origin. When a fever-stricken boy, Mr Dormer had visited the seemingly dying lad in a halting caravan. He had recovered—contrary to the



village doctor's expectations—and the result of the *rencontre* was that "Joe" had become, first, stable-boy, then groom, to the Vicar, and, as a mature coachman, was still in his service.

"They are reg'lar off their 'eads, Miss Barrel, at the thought of seein' of yer once more," he volunteered, as the stout cob climbed steadily uphill along the stony, narrow road between the rough stone walls. "Master, 'e meant to meet ye, but Lor'! 'e cannot say as his soul's 'is own in this 'ere place. It ain't civilised, Miss Barrel, so to say. Them mannerfacteries it is as does it, and them not eddicated like to know what's what. Every man Jack of 'em 'as their own opinions, and sticks to 'em, and there ain't two on 'em thinks alike. Master, now, is a-workin' 'ard at an old man what ses, confident-like, as there ain't no Gawd. 'E's booked, the doctor ses; it's only the beef-jelly and the champain and the brandy and sech as Master and Missis gives 'im as is a-keepin' of 'im goin'. But Master says, 'E sha'n't die if I can 'elp it till 'es changed 'is mind.' Myself, I thinks as the old boy means to 'ave a little more wine and jelly afore 'e'll own up to agreein' with Master's idees, but that ain't neither 'ere nor there."

As they left the little town behind them and drove on—first uphill along a winding road—then through a village, quaint and foreign-looking in the starlit dusk; then along the brow of the hill under the faint, weak light of the rising moon



—the sweet, pure air of the hills, and the familiar, home-like gossip of the well-remembered retainer —exhilarated Beryl. It seemed to her that this arrival was the bridge between the past, with its late horrors, and an earnest, striving, busy future. When Joseph halted at a gate, and she saw lighted windows in a gabled stone house rising from a thick shrubbery of laurels, she felt a "heart for any fate." As he dismounted and she took the reins, then guided the horse along the drive to the door of the quaint old stone vicarage with the mullioned windows, it seemed to her as if nothing of all this was exactly strange. Rather, it seemed curiously familiar, as if she had seen it all some time in a dream.

Even before the horse halted at the door it was opened, and she saw her uncle's figure against a square of yellow light. She had written to prepare him for bad news which was connected with St John. Her letter was timed to arrive some hours before she and Cynthia could reach Deepdale. So it was with additional comfort and consolation that she heard his deep voice bid them welcome, that she felt his fatherly kiss upon her cheek, and that she saw the sweet face of her aunt smiling delightedly in the background. They knew all, but still loved them—perhaps, even, loved them all the more, for St John's conduct.

"My dearest children, I am overjoyed," said the tall, pale lady, who seemed to have blanched and withered since Beryl was last enfolded in her



embrace. "This is a curious place, and the oddest old house! But we will try to make you comfortable. Tea is ready—the old-fashioned vicarage tea, you know! You must put up with us—we cannot always have nice things in the wilds—but I hope there will be something you can eat after your journey. Come upstairs, loves, to your room. How staid you have grown, dear Beryl! And Cynthia! you look like the goddess of the morning, so fresh and fair!"

"And you, auntie, look like the moonlight!" exclaimed Cynthia. She twined herself about the slim figure of her aunt as they went upstairs, while Beryl followed them, recognising familiar pictures and objects at every step. The room to which their aunt conducted them was a long, low-ceiled chamber, with mullioned windows at either end—for in reality two rooms had been made into one. The bright fire in the grate illumined two white, inviting beds placed side by side, and cast flickering gleams upon the old mahogany furniture which Beryl knew and recognised, with a thrill as of one returning home after long, miserable wanderings.

Mrs Dormer lighted the old-fashioned wax ends in the silver candlesticks on the dressing-table and mantelshelf. Meanwhile, a middle-aged maid brought their bags and rugs and bid them welcome, smiling all over her ruddy comely face.

"Why, Priscilla! I never expected to see you. I thought you would have been married long



ago!" exclaimed Cynthia, as Beryl, in her satisfaction, stooped and kissed the woman who had been the favourite attendant of her childish years.

"Some people knows when they are well off, Miss," said the happy-looking woman. "We ain't chivied about 'ere; and the older we grows, the less we likes being chivied. That's how I look at it."

Priscilla was anxious to help them, but Beryl, knowing that she was parlour-maid and ought to be below, would not hear of it. She and Cynthia made a rapid toilet and descended the creaking old staircase with its old-fashioned illumination of candles in bell glasses, to the dining-room—a chamber similar to their bedroom, where the broad window-seats were indoor gardens of arums, azaleas, and other favourite plants of Mrs Dormer's, and a pretty tea-table, displaying cold chicken and beef among the cakes and marmalades, was decorated with cut flowers.

By common consent no word of St John, or of the home just left, or of themselves at all, was uttered during the meal. The Vicar and his wife entertained their nieces with quaint anecdotes of the village folk and of their odd experiences of bucolic idiosyncrasies. But there was a new tenderness in Mr Dormer's blue eyes, an indulgence in his stern yet gentle smile, which comforted Beryl, in spite of that strangely vivid likeness to St John. In feature uncle and nephew were marvellously alike—but one might have stood as



model for Lucifer, the other for St Michael—so opposite was the expression of their handsome faces.

Tea over, Beryl went up to her uncle, and boldly asked if she might see him alone. So he escorted her across the hall—where she stopped momentarily to glance at the old grandfather clock and its familiar silvered face, at the elaborately carved chessmen in their glass case, the stuffed badger, the old coloured engravings and other memories of childish happy days—and found her a comfortable chair by his study fire, which he stirred into a blaze before he took down a well-coloured meerschaum from the pipe-rack and with an "I know you won't mind my smoking," seated himself in his high-backed, old-fashioned armchair.

"Wait one moment, then we will talk," he began, taking out his tobacco-pouch. While he filled his pipe, and, lighting it, took a few preliminary whiffs, Beryl glanced round—a glance of recognition—at the rows of books in their old order on the shelves, at the venerable *escritoire* which had belonged to her grandfather Dormer, and which held the Vicar's neatly-arranged papers, and at the well-worn writing-table before the window. She was asking herself nervously how she should explain the situation. She started as her uncle gave a little "Ahem!"

"You are wondering how you will make me understand what has happened?" he began, half

banteringly. "You need not trouble to tell me anything, Beryl! I know all. Lord St George wrote to me when St John was missing—he wrote daily all through. If you like you can see the last letter I received from him, for it concerns you."

Beryl started, then crimsoned.

"Lord St George—wrote to you? Why? How?" she stammered.

"Surely, you do not resent the generosity, the admirable kindness of a man who could make the name of Dormer a bye-word with a stroke of the pen?" asked the Vicar. He glanced gravely, inquiringly at Beryl, whose eyes gleamed with mingled emotions, suddenly re-awakened by the fact of Lord St George having done this thing—in secret.

She hesitated.

"No; I hope I am grateful! But why write to you secretly?" she exclaimed, with slight disdain.

The Vicar contemplated her curiously. He thought Lord St George's magnanimity so exceptional that he had been puzzled by it—attributing it first to one cause, then to another. He had chidden himself because he could not accept the Earl's solicitude for his kith and kin as simple and unalloyed virtue. But his experience of humanity forbade his honestly taking good deeds for what they were worth, without seeking at least some kind of ulterior motive. He had almost come to the conclusion that Cynthia's beauty had softened

Lord St George's heart, as he watched her during the meal just over. She had seemed to him so radiantly lovely.

"Well," he began, "I can tell you this much; but for your brother's patron he might now be in gaol. I will say no more! Where there is crime to be concealed, those who are noble enough to hush up scandal for the sake of the innocent must be wary—must, indeed, be secret. I have feared for St John, Beryl, since years ago I discovered conduct of his which horrified, terrified me, and I expostulated in vain. He has a heart of stone! I expected no good for you, poor orphans who needed a guide and protector, who had at least some sense of right and wrong! But, truly, St John has exceeded my wildest fears. If it were not for Lord St George—"

Beryl gave an eloquent gesture. "Don't say any more!" she faltered, pale with shame. She felt a shame as her uncle spoke even more acute than that she had felt when Lord St George had so nobly offered to bear her burdens with her disgrace. Pride, resentment, anger almost that the Vicar should have to speak to her thus, nerved her to a sense of desperation. "Don't say any more, uncle!" she exclaimed vehemently. "I hope I am grateful to Lord St George. But, as far as I am concerned, he will not be troubled with a Dormer again! I meant to ask you and dear aunt to give a home to Cynthia. I suppose you understand that she has been jilted—most insult-

ingly? But she is so sweet, so pretty, I am sure she will find a husband, and will not trouble you long. Anyhow, she seems like one of those hot-house flowers which cannot live in the cold winds, in the open. I have no scruples in asking you to take her! Nor do I mind begging you to help me with Pearl's schooling, and to invite her for the holidays, until she is able to think of her life, and what to do with it. But for myself—I mean to ask nothing of anyone. St John has made me a beggar—and I must act as one who has nothing on earth but a will to work, and a body to work with. I mean to earn my living, uncle! I am not worth much to anyone now, but I could be old peoples' companion-nurse, or governess to little ones, and I would take such pains, that after a little while I should be worth my salt. I feel it—I know it! You look as if you doubted me! Wait and see!"

"My dear girl, I do not doubt your cleverness for one moment—nor your obstinacy—I beg your pardon—your power of carrying out your intentions," returned the Vicar, hiding an involuntarily smile with his hand. "I only want to know what your future husband has to say to these somewhat wild ideas of yours."

Beryl stared at him aghast. Then she sat up. "My—future—husband?" she slowly asked.

"Captain Paulyn," said the Vicar. "From first to last Lord St George has insisted upon the—the—unfortunate circumstances making no difference whatever in the engagement."



"Engagement? There is no engagement!" cried Beryl, passionately.

"Lord St George evidently thinks there is," returned her uncle, more puzzled than before. "But let me read you his last letter. May I?"

"It will make no difference," said Beryl, a smile on her pale lips, a strange feeling as of death in her heart. She watched the Vicar unlock a table-drawer, take out a packet of letters, and, extracting one, return to his chair, with a sickening feeling of utter disgust with life. Everything seemed crooked—everything hopeless.

"This is Lord St George's last letter," began Mr Dormer, assuming his *pince-nez*. "After expressing his relief at the news that you are to be with us for the present, he alludes to the engagement.

"'You will naturally understand how thankful I feel that Miss Dormer and her sister are under your care when I tell you that until now I have not dared to enlighten my brother as to the state of affairs,' he goes on. 'His heart is so entirely, so absolutely, given to your eldest niece, that everything affecting her happiness or welfare must of necessity affect his. I am writing to him with the utmost caution—and should very much prefer it if he never knew the exact details of this most painful business. Meanwhile, as things do leak out in a most extraordinary way in this world of gossip, I honestly hope that this marriage of my younger brother with Miss Dormer may take



place soon—the sooner the better! As a wedding-gift, I am anxious to settle an adequate dowry upon the bride, and to present the bridegroom with one of the unentailed Paulyn estates: the rest I leave to you and Mrs Dormer to arrange. As soon as I hear your views, I will see my brother and expedite matters as far as I can. Meanwhile I remain, dear Mr Dormer, yours very sincerely,

"'ST GEORGE.'"

As the Vicar was folding the sheet to return it to its envelope, he paused, startled. Beryl had laughed. But it was such a strange, unnatural laugh, it chilled him.

"Have a wedding by all means!" she cried. There were two red spots on her pale cheeks. Her eyes shone. "But—a wedding without a bride would be absurd, wouldn't it? My dear uncle, don't look scared! Lord St George is under a most extraordinary misapprehension. I might possibly have been brought to marry Captain Paulyn before our troubles—but now, I would rather die!"

There was no mistaking the intensity of her resolve. The Vicar, as he slowly placed Lord St George's letter in his pocket, knew this—that however Captain Paulyn's affections were engaged, Beryl's were unimplicated. He was sorry, and he said so.

"I am more than sorry, Beryl," he began. "Because, if you were wife to Lord St George's

heir, it would give the lie to any scandal about St John."

"Would you have me marry a man I shall never love? would you have me marry against every inclination? Why, it would send me mad!" cried Beryl, passionately. "This awful fall of St John's has dragged me down into such depths of misery that there is only one thing which I can think of with patience — work! Uncle, if I died of overwork I should not mind—if only I can restore some of the money St John stole! I don't know who the people are he stole from—it does not matter now—but when I have slaved and scraped and saved, I can soon find out! Oh, surely, you sympathise with me? Think of the disgrace—a Dormer a thief! Think of what it would be to me to restore—I, a Dormer—what a Dormer had stolen!"

She panted—the tears stood in her eyes. Her uncle felt affected. He rose, and stood before the fire, gazing pitifully down upon her beautiful, grief-stricken face.

"My dearest girl, you must do as you think best," he gently said. He felt very tender towards Beryl. How could he help it? While she had spoken, she had shown a stern sense of honour, an ascetic spirit, which had kinship with his own —the unbending soul which had made him sacrifice all to the single-hearted rectitude which was the keynote of his life. Then and there he cast aside his own hopes that by a marriage with Lord

St George's heir, St John's fatal *fiasco* would be obscured, if not forgotten; and when they presently returned to the drawing-room, where Cynthia was reading aloud descriptions of the latest smart fashions from a lady's newspaper, while her aunt crocheted a shawl for a very particular old lady in the parish, Beryl had her uncle's permission to write definitely to Captain Paulyn on the morrow breaking her engagement.



CHAPTER X

"But you should write to Lord St George at the same time," the Vicar had said, while half-reluctantly assenting to her giving her lover his *congé*. "He evidently wishes his brother to marry you, and you owe it to him to be as frank with him as you have been with me."

It was the letter to the Earl which Beryl felt disinclined to write. She awoke in the night and suddenly remembered all he had been to them in their hour of need. He had behaved as a real brother to them both—and he evidently wished them to consider him as one.

"Still, he ought not to want me to marry Roland against my will and inclination," she thought. "Why should he wish this marriage so much? That letter of his to uncle was almost impatient! Can it be that he has fallen in love with Cynthia, and means to justify himself to himself by Roland's marriage with me?"

The thought gave her unaccountable pain. It strengthened her determination to write decisively to Captain Paulyn. Next morning, therefore, when Cynthia came in from the garden with a



small stack of flowers, and asked her to help in arranging them, she pleaded correspondence, declined to accompany Mrs Dormer and Cynthia "round the parish" for the same reason, and betaking herself to the quaint, pretty bedchamber, locked herself in to write.

The letter to Captain Paulyn was easy, because it was a positive relief to her to write it. She chid herself for her entire lack of sympathy with, and pity for, her passionate young lover. As she was honest with herself, she knew, indeed, she had a certain sense of satisfaction as she penned the cruel words. But she would be truthful, she told herself. She thought herself a hard-hearted, ungrateful wretch — therefore entire truthfulness might be a redeeming feature in her case.

The sun shone into the pretty room, the birds twittered in anticipation of the early spring days of mating-tide, as she penned her ultimatum.

"DEAR CAPTAIN PAULYN,"—she wrote quickly and firmly—"Since you were so generous as to ask me to be your wife, events have happened which will effectually prevent my contemplating marriage with *anyone*, either now or at any time in the future. I thank you all the same for the honour you have done me, and with all my heart wish you a more suitable wife than I could possibly have been. I have only one request to make you —that you will thoroughly accept this refusal of



mine, for nothing that can happen can by any possibility change it. With great appreciation of the honour you have done me, I shall always remain, very gratefully yours,

"BERYL DORMER."

"I have repeated 'the honour you have done me,' but it is all the better! He will think less of me when he sees I cannot even write a letter properly," she mused, as she wrote the address and lighting one of the wax ends in the old silver candlesticks, sealed the envelope. Then she leant back and bit her lips with a sigh of discontent. If only she could get out of writing to Lord St George, except a few lines of gratitude for his kindness! If only she had not to tell him she refused him as a brother-in-law—she, with a brother who might yet stand in the dock a suspected man, and be declared a felon! Her ingratitude would seem horrible.

"Well, if he is disgusted, so much the better; he will not see Cynthia again!" she wildly told herself. "Cynthia is the very last person to be wife to such a king among men—a noble, steadfast, grand human being as he is!" Her involuntary mental tribute to her benefactor seemed to strengthen her. "I will write as truthfully as I can to him!" she told herself, and, flushing with excitement, she seized the quill she had laid aside, placed a sheet of notepaper on the blotter, and began, hot-hearted—

"MY LORD,—I have to write to you. I don't know how, and that is the truth. If only you could see into my mind! Indeed, I am grateful, more grateful than I have ever been to anyone in my whole life. You have saved us from despair. You have been more than any brother to us. I feel overcome when I think of all you have done, of all your kindness!

"But I cannot marry your brother. I do not love him. I am not really grateful to him for caring for me. My hope is we shall never meet again, that is one reason why I have written telling him if he wants to marry it cannot be me. But there is another reason why I cannot marry him, or anybody. This awful disgrace through my brother has determined me to be beholden to no one on this earth for my daily bread. So I intend to remain single, and to earn my living. Only the fact of feeling that I am toiling and striving if possible to pay back some of the money which people have lost through St John, will make life bearable to me. Pray, pray, my Lord, do nothing to hinder me in doing as I wish to do, or I may utterly lose heart.

"I repeat this, my prayer to your Lordship. *Do not prevent my doing the only thing which can give me patience with life, or I fear despair will seize and finish me!*

"I have such confidence in you—little wonder! —that I feel to ask you something is for that something to be granted.



"I know you will be pleased to hear that my uncle and aunt are everything that is kind. I have accepted a home for Cynthia with them, and my little sister Pearl will spend her holidays here. But my uncle consented to my writing finally to Captain Paulyn, and to my seeking employment, which will enable me, first, to keep myself, and then to repay, partly if not altogether, St John's creditors.

"I cannot thank your Lordship properly—I shall not attempt to—but I hope you will be rewarded a hundred thousand times for every good deed of your life on earth.—Your faithful and grateful BERYL DORMER."

She re-read the letter. It seemed to express her feelings. She folded and sealed it like the other. Then, suddenly, she felt a strange sensation—a choking which was relieved by a passionate burst of tears. Flinging herself on the chintz-covered sofa, she sobbed and cried until she was scared, for tears came rarely to Beryl's relief. Sorrow seemed to sink into the depths of her being, and to remain there undiminished, unsolaced and unrelieved.

"Oh, well, if I can cry, this must be a trivial matter; I shall forget all about it before I am much older," she consoled herself by thinking. Certainly those unwelcome and unsought tears were a curious relief. As she bathed her eyes over and over again, and consulted the toilet-



glass anxiously to ascertain whether there were sufficient traces of emotion to excite notice, she laughed—the first genuine, honest laugh for many a long day past.

Then, as she determined to go out, and assuming cloak and hat went down to post her letters in the collecting-box in the hall, she actually hummed a tune. When she made her way uphill through the prettily-terraced garden at the back of the house she felt almost exhilarated. Seated on a rustic bench under some Scotch firs on the brow of the hill, she gazed at the fertile, narrow valley, at the picturesque cottages clustered around a fine old manor-house where the Squire lived, and at the blue hills beyond, with the exhilaration which succeeds finality. "At last I have taken a decisive step," she told herself, enjoying the chill, if fresh, spring breeze which toyed with the loosened tendrils of her hair. "I have literally broken with the past, in which I was but a poor, passive being—and have planted my first footstep into the great, active, living world of workers!"

There was a light in her eyes which escaped Cynthia, who was generally too much occupied with self to be observant, also her aunt, who had enough to do to attend to Cynthia's prattle. But Mr Dormer looked hard at his niece more than once during luncheon. She seemed to him to have new life in her. He was sure, then, that he had



been right in indulging her in regard to her views of her immediate future.

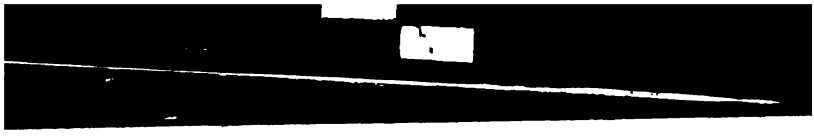
"A loveless marriage would mean ruin to a character like hers," he told himself. He drove her and Cynthia out that afternoon. Beryl sat by him on the front seat of the dogcart—Cynthia was chattering to Joseph at the back. But the Vicar carefully refrained from even nearing the subjects uppermost in their minds. He spoke of lighter matters.

Next morning, however, as they were leaving the breakfast-table, he asked Beryl for "a minute in the study," and when they were *tête-à-tête* in his sanctum, he showed her an advertisement he had noticed in the *Times* of the previous day.

"It struck me that this is the sort of engagement you had in your mind," he said. "I know these advertisements mislead one on occasion—but somehow this reads genuine."

Beryl took up the paper, and scanned the advertisement, which ran as follows :—

"Wanted, a young gentlewoman, kindly, patient, and well-educated, as companion to a childless lady residing in the country. Must not object to the occasional presence of men, or to cats. Those who are fond of cats should write to B.B., Box 10,014, *Times* office. Mem.—Unexceptional references indispensable. Handsome salary."



"Why, uncle—it is the very thing!" cried Beryl, brightening. "I don't mind any number of cats—and I hope I can endure men! But—do you think I am eligible?"

The Vicar sighed. "If you like, you can write, of course," he soberly remarked. "Meanwhile, you must be prepared for that to be possibly the end as well as the beginning! My love, don't look disappointed. Of course it may be a great chance Providence has chosen to put in your way, or it may be nothing at all. Then, it may be something between those two extremes—a situation you would find intolerable! The person who compiled that advertisement is eccentric, to say the least. This is my advice: Write, but don't expect a reply—meanwhile, go on looking out and applying for whatever situation you think may suit you. It is generally the case that the thing one is looking and hoping for tumbles at one's feet from the most unlikely quarter, if, indeed, it tumbles at all."

It was hardly comforting or encouraging, this speech of the Vicar's, but Beryl was determined to be a soldier of life fighting for daily bread, and to treat discouragement and disappointment as "all in the day's work." She borrowed her uncle's daily and weekly papers, studied the advertisements, and replied to many others which seemed possibilities as well as to that of the eccentric B.B. Then she steadily put aside worrying thoughts of the future, and tried to throw herself into the calm, orderly life of the vicarage.



The next day or two passed quietly. Her heart beat a little quicker when Priscilla brought in letters—she feared a reply from Captain Paulyn—but the third day arrived without bringing her a single communication.

Then, just as she and Cynthia were starting soon after breakfast for a drive to a distant part of his scattered parish with the Vicar—Cynthia was already packed into the back seat, and the Vicar came out, drawing on his gloves—a telegraph-boy came up.

"Miss Baril Dormer?" he asked, looking from one girl to the other, admiration on his round, rustic visage.

"Yes," said Beryl, taking the buff envelope with a sinking dread of its contents.

Naturally her thoughts flew to St John—either captured alive or found dead. At first she hardly understood the message.

"*Please come at once, to see me, Lady Beard, The Grange, Ilkfield. Stay night if possible. Wire which train that carriage may meet you.*"

Beryl handed the telegram to her uncle.

"Go, certainly," he said, in a low voice. "It is barely forty miles from this. I have heard of the Beards. You have the reply form. Write you will start by the twelve train. If you don't care for it, you will like to return at once."

Beryl wrote a message and dispatched the boy. Then her uncle glanced at his watch.

"I will put off my expedition till this afternoon, and see you off myself," he said. Then with a few words of explanation to Cynthia, the dog-cart was dismissed till later, and they returned within.

Cynthia was very curious, and when she persevered in cross-questioning Beryl until she elicited the main facts of the case, her anger knew no bounds.

"You must be mad!" she wailed. "No, I don't believe you are even that. You are so utterly selfish and cruel, that you are ready to sacrifice both Pearl and me to gratify your whims! You are worse than St John — much worse! Think what you are doing—throwing away a great position—for as Captain Paulyn's wife, you might have got us anybody as our husbands! And then degrading yourself to be a paid servant of the first person who will engage you—for that is all governesses and companions are, the paid servants of their employers. Then the awful ingratitude to Lord St George! However, I will let him know that I have nothing to do with it—that I feel properly in the matter! I will write off to him to-day, poor dear, angelic man; he shall know that there is one decent-minded Dormer in existence!"

"You must do exactly as you please," said Beryl, astonished and wounded. She was busily

sorting and arranging her wardrobe with a view to a possible migration. "I am not your guardian, happily! So you can go your own way and say or write whatever you like — and I shall go mine!"

Cynthia's accusations stung her to the quick, but she kept them to herself, joining her uncle shortly after and accompanying him to the station with a certain quiet indifference which he secretly wondered at.

"I hardly understand her, I fear," he told himself, after she had smiled and nodded to him from the window, as the train steamed out of the station. "She has gone off to interview strangers —possible employers—almost apathetically, as if it were some insignificant errand which concerned her not at all."

It had struck him that Beryl's complete rejection of Captain Paulyn was peculiar. All girls had instincts in regard to their settlement in life. He had heard, too, that Lord St George's younger brother was both handsome and attractive, quite a favourite with the opposite sex, old and young. Of course, Beryl had that horror of moral degradation, that keen sense of honour, that honest pride in rectitude, which had hitherto been characteristics of the Dormers, but—well, he acknowledged to himself that, with his varied knowledge of poor human nature, she puzzled him.

"There is something more under it all than



appears upon the surface, I am almost certain!" he told himself, as he slowly returned uphill. "Not that she knows it herself, whatever it is. Well, time will prove—we shall see!"



CHAPTER XI

Beryl's forty-mile journey was broken by temporary stoppages at junctions to change trains. Ilkfield was one of the outlying villages of Moreton, a well-known little town, but it possessed a station of its own, and as the train halted at the platform a tall man-servant in livery came up when Beryl alighted, looking somewhat anxiously about her.

"For the Grange, ma'am?" he respectfully asked, touching his cockaded hat. Then, as she replied in the affirmative, he took her cloak and umbrella with the deference of a well-trained servant, and saying, "This way, ma'am, please," he escorted her, the only passenger except two labourers and an old woman, through the station—where the porter who took her ticket obsequiously touched his cap—to the yard, where a beautiful barouche and pair of handsome bays were awaiting her.

She was ushered to the carriage, and the fur rug carefully tucked in by the footman. Then he mounted the box, and the coachman drove

quickly off, first, along the high-road, here sheltered by tall elms, then through one of the prettiest villages she had ever seen, where the whitewashed cottages had thatched roofs, and on a knoll the ivy-covered church, with a Norman tower, was surrounded by a sloping graveyard well planted with yew and cypress.

There was a certain excitement of curiosity and anticipation as Beryl drove in state to the interview with her first possible employer, which was a welcome reaction after that little scene with her sister. The air, too, was keen and fresh. When, after climbing a slope and driving across a furzy, somewhat bare and bleak heath-land, they entered a park—where the bracken-covered slopes studded with wind-blown trees had a certain wildness of aspect, and about half-a-mile away Beryl saw a fine old Elizabethan mansion, with mullioned windows in its wide, castellated façade—she said to herself, "Come what may, be the drawbacks anything almost, I must try and make that grand old place my home!"

As they drove up to the door, which was round the corner on the south side, where a magnolia clambered up the hoary walls and had contrived to embrace part of a turret, the door opened, and a solemn-looking footman in a picturesque livery of black velvet and silver, with velvet "smalls," silk stockings, and powdered hair, took her impedimenta and with an imperturbable

countenance, asked her name, said, "This way, ma'am, if you please," and preceded her across the fine old English-looking hall—which, but for its modern billiard-table, might have been a hall of centuries ago, with its wide hearth, blazing logs, its quaint old oak chairs and chests, its dinted old armour and trophies of weapons of bygone ages, and its blackened pictures—and led her along a corridor towards a long stained-glass window until, just before they reached another window which overlooked the park, he paused, opened a door on the left, and announced, "Miss Dormer, my lady."

Beryl saw one of the most beautiful rooms she had ever dreamt of, its walls white and gold-panelled, its floor white and green carpeted, and seemingly, at first sight, half filled with plants and flowers. Then her eyes, first somewhat dazzled by the sunshine that poured in through the two long windows, with their view of the tree-studded slopes of the park, met those of a tall, middle-aged lady, who had risen at her entrance and came towards her. Thin, delicately pale, grey-haired, slight and exquisitely dressed in grey silk and rich lace—that was Beryl's estimate of her hostess as she advanced. But as Lady Beard took her hand in her long white fingers, and gave her an approving smile, the girl said to herself, "She is beautiful—lovely!" Indeed, despite the fact that between fifty and sixty summers had passed since Lady Beard's birth, she was still



attractive. Although her silver hair was pinned in curls on either side of her finely-wrinkled face in a bygone fashion suggesting age, her large, deep-grey eyes were full of youthful fire.

"How good of you to come so soon!" she said, in a musical voice, drawing Beryl to her side on the sofa. "We shall lunch directly. Look at the cats. The Persians are a little difficult at times, but Mimi and her children and grandchildren will soon be friendly. Mimi! Come and speak to Miss Dormer."

A large white cat, which was lying watching them from her stool in the sunshine, rose with a bored little mew, stretched herself, then sprang down and came to her mistress, who stroked her, then lifted her to Beryl's lap.

"That's right! She likes you!" she cried, with pleasure, as the sleek creature curled herself round and began to purr, glancing quaintly up into Beryl's face with her blue eyes. "The rest will follow all in good time. You don't dislike the creatures? That's right! I felt sure you would not have come here if you did! Miss Dormer, I am a childless woman, and I think that is one reason I love animals so much! Another is, that they seem so much better than the human beings, who really are nothing but their natural enemies, poor innocent creatures!"

Beryl, who had been glancing round at the



various feline beauties—two handsome Persians, on cushions before the glowing wood fire, a couple of snow-white creatures like Mimi on the sofa, and a sweet-faced tabby in a large round basket with a whole brood of soft kittens—turned a little anxiously towards her hostess. Lady Beard laughed.

"You are afraid I am crazy or too eccentric to live!" she exclaimed, with a certain *naïveté*. "I assure you I am neither! I am only an awfully lonely woman. Have you heard of my husband, Miss Dormer? No? Well, I honestly believe him to be one of the best and most honest men alive. If he is an unconscious brute in my estimation, everyone else would call him a fine old English gentleman, a typical bluff, good-hearted squire of the old school. But we are as opposite as the poles. We have not a thought, a feeling, a taste in common. That is why I want a girl like you to support me! When I had your letter I believed I had found exactly what I needed—now that I am getting too old and feeble to fight my battles alone — for I have heard of your uncle, the Vicar of Deepdale. He is an iron man. His niece must be a girl of character—true, faithful and firm—and when I saw you, my whole nature cried out, "She is!"

"I wish I were!" cried Beryl, roused and touched by Lady Beard's strange speech. Her sweet voice had risen and fallen, now plaintive,

now pitiful, then appealing, and the girl's whole impressionable nature was excited, thrilled. "I am afraid I am not! And, oh, dear lady, forgive me for seeming ungrateful, but I could not undertake to fight anyone's battles with them—I can hardly gather together sufficient strength and courage to fight my own!"

"Ah—but you forget—when you come here your own personal battles will cease for a time," returned Lady Beard, persuasively. "And I must not give you an exaggerated idea of our lives here. Sir Harry has drifted into a way of treating me entirely as his antagonist, that is all. If I like anything, he is its enemy. If I want anything done, that is the one thing of all others he will not consent to. He teaches the outdoor dogs to hunt cats, he glories in killing creatures because he knows I hate it, and if Mimi had not punished one of his dogs so that the rest have a wholesome fear of her and the rest, there would often be terrible scenes in the big hall, where he insists on having meals served. The secretary, Mr Davenant, a good, kind boy, the son of dear old friends of mine, has really kept peace hitherto. But he is getting older; and one evening after Sir Harry had been at his worst—in fact, utterly outrageous—I suddenly thought that the presence of a young lady here might be a make-weight. He is polite enough to other ladies. He will be polite to you! Come! Don't look as if you could not undertake it, but come to luncheon—



those are the luncheon bells—and tell me afterwards that you will reward me for my frankness and stay with me—or, at all events, give us a trial!"

She took Beryl's hand, and was leading her from the room, when another door opened, the green curtain concealing it was drawn back, and a middle-aged woman with a tray, followed by a housemaid with another tray, came in, and all the cats except the tiny kittens, sprang up and surrounded the pair.

"Now watch!" said Lady Beard, as the girl set down her tray on a vacant table, and putting aside chairs, spread a large cloth on the floor, and began to stud it with a number of different little china plates containing food. "Pearson, you have not given Patty too much? She is hardly herself yet, I fancy."

"I have taken care, my lady," returned the older woman, who was dressed in handsome black silk, guarded by a large white embroidered apron and muslin cuffs. Then she smiled genially at Beryl. "They each know their own plate, m'm," she volunteered. "If it was ever so, they wouldn't interfere with each other's."

Beryl glanced up at the curious spectacle of the various cats stepping gingerly upon the white cloth, and winding in and out between the plates until reaching their own, then she proceeded, arm-in-arm with Lady Beard, along the corridor into the big hall.

Here there was a transformation scene. Between the billiard-table and the great hearth with the blazing logs, a table was spread. Silver shone, glass gleamed, and two great dishes with covers that reflected distorted versions of the fine old apartment, with its armour and weapons and old pictures, were at either end of the board. Halfway between the two stood a huge silver group of figures—huntsmen, dogs, and deer. There were no flowers. Under one of the high-mullioned windows was an old oak buffet piled with plate. A butler stood waiting with a couple of men-servants in livery. Before the fire stood a burly man of middle height, dressed in gamekeeper fashion. His red, weather-beaten face, with keen, brilliant little black eyes under beetling brows, looked good-natured. But for his iron-gray hair and deep wrinkles Beryl would have guessed him to be the junior of his graceful wife. At his side stood a tall young man in a tweed shooting suit. Undeniably handsome, there was an ironic expression on his long face with the clear-cut features, and a curious fixity in the deep-set dark eyes which stared Beryl almost out of countenance as she followed Lady Beard to the dining-table, which made her instinctively dislike him almost as strongly as she had instinctively liked her hostess.

"Ho! Parson Dormer's gal, you are, are you?" said Sir Harry, a little gruffly, as he took his seat at the table, murmuring a brief grace, and at once



plunging into the talk as he brandished a huge carving-knife and fork. "No! I don't know him; he's one of the new-fangled parsons. I knew his predecessor well—poor old chap! game for anything, he was! Rode to hounds till he was too weak to sit straight, and so blind he couldn't see a hedge a dozen yards ahead. Have some beef? No, have some chicken, then, plain boiled? We don't have any kickshaws here. If people are hungry, they can eat good beef and mutton, and if they don't know good vittles when they see 'em, they can go without. Drink beer? No? Spirits? Claret? Toast-and-water? Plain water? Bless the gal!"

Profoundly disgusted, seemingly, Sir Harry called for a tankard of ale, then began to eat with apparent voracity, paying no further attention to the rest, who conversed in a subdued way—at least Lady Beard asked Beryl a few civil questions about her journey, and her uncle's neighbourhood, and spoke now and then amiably to the secretary, who otherwise maintained a discreet silence, and wore an inscrutable expression, which was neither one of satisfaction nor distaste, upon his long, pale face.

Presently, there was a diversion. As a door opened, a couple of bulldogs came in and took up their position on either side of Sir Harry's chair. To Beryl their grotesque faces were absolutely hideous.

"Beauties, ain't they?" asked Sir Harry,



munching, and glancing with a sharp, shrewd expression in his keen little eyes at Beryl. "What? You think them ugly?" He chuckled, cut off some lumps of underdone meat, and flung them to the dogs. "You're no dog fancier evidently! They're the admiration and envy of the whole county, and as for me, I love 'em. Wouldn't take any money for either of 'em. You can ask my lady why, if you like. She'll tell ye." He gave a loud laugh.

Beryl glanced a little anxiously at her hostess, but Lady Beard was silent. Only her lowered eyelids and compressed lips bore witness that she had both heard and resented her husband's speech. Then, as the joints were removed, and a big Cheshire as well as a Stilton cheese graced the board and claimed Sir Harry's attention, while a delicate little pudding was placed before Lady Beard, Sir Harry began business talk with his secretary, which was still proceeding while Lady Beard rose and escorted Beryl out of the hall into the corridor again.

"You will stay the night?" she asked, stopping after they were out of earshot. "No? I am sorry! Still — perhaps — well, you had better come round the house, then into the grounds. When you have seen the dear old place you may be tempted to stay with us."

Her deprecating, pleading manner made Beryl feel almost ashamed—it was so absolutely different to that of an employer engaging a dependant.



She was about to say something to assure Lady Beard of her appreciation of herself, but her hostess was so eager and alert to show the Grange and its surroundings that she left her at once to assume her bonnet and cloak. When she returned to the recess where she had left Beryl gazing out of window at a somewhat melancholy quadrangle, where an old stone fountain in the centre of a smooth grassplot sent up a feeble jet of water, she suggested showing her the grounds first, "as it looked like rain." So, once more crossing the hall, where the luncheon table was being cleared, Lady Beard preceded her young guest by a garden door into a quaint, old-fashioned pleasaunce.

"This is about the only topic on which Sir Harry and I agree," she began, as they strolled along the gravelled paths between the high box. The garden was a typical old English one. Quaintly-cut box-trees and yews studded the flower-beds at intervals. All kinds of simple herbaceous plants would flourish by-and-by among the arches—now bare, but presently to run over with clusters of sweet roses. The large, square, walled-in kitchen-garden, neat with its netted rows of peas, beans, and other green things just peeping, tiny green spots above the brown, fragrant mould, was equally the taste of both husband and wife. As Lady Beard pointed out the peach-trees, showing their pink blossom on their trailed branches, and her favourite standard apple-trees, still bare of

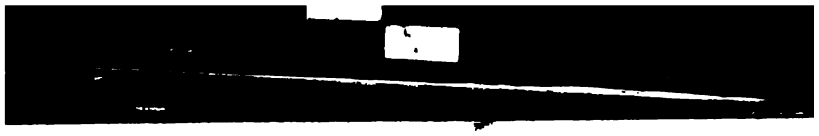
green as they stood among the young cabbages or rows of seedlings; as she stood under the old mulberry where, she sadly said, she used to come and wonder what she could do to "get on better" with her husband, she added,—

"Our mutual liking for the gardens is the one exception to our contradictory lives. There always is an exception to every rule, isn't there? And now, to explain what he said at luncheon. He had those bulldogs as young pups simply to train them to kill cats. They were taught first to clear the stables and farm. Then, when there was not a poor kitten left, they naturally began upon my own pets. One day when I had incautiously, unsuspectingly, gone to spend the day with an old friend—almost a sister to me—who was ill, there was a massacre. I came home to find all my darlings dead, but one—Mimi. She had scrambled upon a cabinet, and had hidden behind a Rose du Barry tureen. When she heard me coming in, and exclaiming in my horror and grief, she gave a wild mew, and leapt into my arms. It was my one gleam of comfort in the cruel deaths of my pets. Of course, Sir Harry disclaimed having anything to do with their destruction—indeed, next day he presented me with some beauties, those Persians and another like Mimi. Equally, of course, I gave him the benefit of the doubt. But since that horrid day I have had no scruple in privately offering a sovereign for every



fox's head, and five shillings for every young pheasant or partridge. I spend a great deal of money in this way—and even now the blood-thirsty men cannot understand the dearth of foxes, and the failure of their efforts to 'preserve' the poor innocent gamebirds for them to shoot at! That makes me feel even with them!"

She laughed. It was a laugh of such almost childlike hilarity that Beryl laughed too. Then, after a brief visit to the home farm, with its houses full of sleek cows, and its delightful dairy, a paradise of cleanliness, Lady Beard took her visitor over the house—which was enchanting to Beryl, so entirely had its antique style been maintained by constant care and replenishment. There was hardly a room from basement to attic which would not have delighted an artist seeking models for mediæval interiors. There was no incongruous introduction of modern furniture to jar fastidious taste. The beautiful rooms had been carefully renewed in similar style when the inevitable decay of stuff or material set in. It was like stepping back a few hundred years into a mansion of the period. Still, after Beryl had taken tea in Lady Beard's boudoir with her, and her hostess was driving her to the station through an early spring shower and put the sudden momentous question to her—a question which was almost an appeal—Would she accept the situation? she hesitated.



"I don't know—I must think," she reluctantly replied. "Really and truly I should love to be with you—but—you are not alone, Lady Beard! And to-day, honestly, at luncheon, something seemed to say to me that if I came to you I might do more harm than good!"

"Then the something was wrong, I assure you it was!" said Lady Beard, in that girlish, innocent way which contrasted so oddly with her age. "My dear child, I have so longed for a daughter, and you would be just what I should have wished and asked for! You have no parents. You should not miss parents if you came to me! If I could not actually adopt you—because, of course, Sir Harry is my husband; I have learnt that a wife is very secondary indeed—I would adopt you in my heart! Think it over, my dear; you have seen and heard the worst of us. I have often felt that if I had had a daughter, Sir Harry would have been softened—a totally different man. I have seen girls have such influence with their fathers. But you say that is different? They have influence because of the father's pride in them! True! But there is a firmness as well as a gentleness about you, dear, that makes me confident that if you will only come and live with us, you will work wonders!"

Beryl left Lady Beard waving her hand to her on the platform, pledged to give the matter her earnest consideration, also to be guided by her uncle's advice. The nearer she came to her



present home the more uncertain and ill at ease she felt.

"If I go there, I shall rue it—no good will come of it," she disconsolately told herself. Her heart felt heavy within her.



CHAPTER XII

"You want my honest advice?" asked the Vicar. It was the morning following Beryl's visit to Ilkfield. After giving her uncle as exact and detailed an account of her experiences as she possibly could, Beryl, seated by his study table, was awaiting his opinion with an intensity of mingled anxiety and apprehension that surprised herself. "You want the truth? Without any consideration of your or anyone else's feelings? Is that it?"

"Certainly," said she. But her voice trembled —her face grew a shade paler.

"Then—marry Captain Paulyn," he drily said. "He was here yesterday. I said you were not to be told until we had had our talk. But—well, Beryl, honestly, I am puzzled. He seemed so sure that you cared for him—that it is only some foolish pride which is keeping you apart."

She smiled, a bitter little smile. "Will you believe me, uncle, if I tell you that if there was not another man in the world, yet that I wanted to be married, I would not marry him?" she energetically cried. "Oh! I am so anxious to

make you understand, that I cannot explain myself!"

"Oh, I understand, well enough," he returned, a little hopelessly. "When a woman won't, she won't, and there's an end on't! Do as you please, my dear! I hope you will not live to regret your obduracy, that is all—for I must say that the young man seemed to me a nice young fellow enough, and that he cares for you no soul could doubt—for you are no heiress—nor do the Paulyns rank the Dormers as their equals, whatever the Dormers may think."

Beryl reared her proud little head.

"If I loved Captain Paulyn—which I do not—that is the reason which would prevent me from accepting his offer of marriage," she said. "But about the other thing — shall I accept Lady Beard's offer of a home?"

"That you yourself must decide, my dear," said the Vicar, gently but firmly. Nor could Beryl discover his opinion on the subject, although she asked to accompany him to the village where he had sick poor to visit, and sounded him by subtle leading questions all the way.

"Go for a walk and think it over," was his parting speech to her before he disappeared into one of the whitewashed, thatch-roofed cottages where an old woman lay waiting for her well-earned rest after nearly a century of patient work-a-day life. As he sat by the bedside in the humble, low-ceiled cottage room, and thought of the

myriads of cares which had graven those deep lines upon the aged face upon the pillow, the Vicar almost wished that his niece could hear the history of some of the workers' lives. "She would feel differently then, perhaps," he told himself.

But as Beryl went up the sloping village road towards the church, she gazed almost longingly at the pretty cottages which looked such peaceful little homes, and wished herself one of their inhabitants. "After all, what happiness—to have such few wants—such simple work," she mused. Then she thought of Captain Paulyn with a shudder. "It would be all very well at first, while I was a new toy," she reflected, "while the first glamour lasted! But after that there would be reproaches, or, at least, silent animadversions. Even if I could bring myself to please everyone, and marry him—that silent disparagement would be unbearable. Unbearable? Impossible! It would drive me mad!"

As she told herself this, with inward passion, she had just passed into the churchyard by the swing-gate, and was making her way back between the rows of graves—past the fine old ivy-covered building—to her temporary home. The abode of the quiet dead seemed to chide her clamouring resentment. She was standing under a venerable yew, looking downward at the clustering cottages on the slope below the churchyard, and trying to attune her mind to the acceptation of the com-



panion's position offered her so sweetly by Lady Beard, when she heard a quick footstep behind her which she instinctively recognised. Her heart gave a warning leap as she abruptly turned.

It was Captain Paulyn, slim, dark, handsome, but frowning. His soft felt hat was crowded down upon his knit brows. As he came up to her she heard him draw a hissing breath.

"At last," he hoarsely said, snatching her hands and holding them so tightly that she bit her lip with the pain. "Now—what does this all mean? Are you mad? I thought you too strong-brained to be sent daft because your brother has had some bad speculations and knew too little of the world, poor devil, to face them!"

He almost flung her hands from him as he read her expression aright. No—there was no shadow of a suggestion of gladness on that marble face with the steady brows, downcast eyes, and drooping white lips. She looked—a martyr. Then, a swift gleam of hope seemed to shoot across his mind. Perhaps—indeed, of course—she was a martyr to what she considered duty—or, possibly, to that indomitable pride of hers. She was certainly as proud as Lucifer!

"Darling, forgive me!" he began, brokenly—then, with a cautious glance about him, for he had the command of himself—and seeing no one in sight, he knelt down before her on the dusty path. "See, I am a beggar at your feet, beseeching you to listen to me, to reason—"



"For Heaven's sake get up, and be sensible!" she cried, flushing crimson, with a scared, frightened stare around. "Do you know where you are—what you are doing? Everyone can see us here—the whole village—"

"Everyone in the world is welcome to see me. I don't care—it is you who are so jolly careful of appearances!" he said, rebuffed, rising and impatiently dusting his knees with his handkerchief. "Heavens! what do you want? Tell me, and I will do it. Can I say more?"

She gave him a steady glance. "No," she slowly said. "You ask me—what do I want? I will tell you! And honestly, truly, as we stand here in this sacred spot, under Heaven! If it were the last words I could speak—if I were to die now, here, I should say the same. I do not love you. I do not wish to marry you, or anyone! I am very grateful to you for wishing to marry me, but I have only one thing to ask you—that you will go away and forget that I have ever existed!"

The two stood motionless, gazing into each other's eyes—in his were incredulity, desperation, yet obstinate persistence; in hers a calm, stern sadness.

"I knew you would say something of that sort," he began bitterly. "I ought to have told you, first, that if you think your brother is in any extremities, I know to the contrary. He is right enough."

She started. She was off guard. Anxiety, fear, hope, all leapt up within her.

"Oh, you have heard of St John! Tell me," she implored, with a sob. He gazed at her somewhat sardonically, assuring himself that he might have known that her keeping him at arms' length was mere petty womanly vanity, the identification of herself with her brother's misdeeds, or misfortunes, or both.

"Nothing from him personally," he answered, unable to suppress a subtle contempt. "But what is much more to the point, from my brother."

She gasped. "From—Lord St George?" she feebly said, retreating a little and leaning against a tall, ugly, old headstone, which recorded the demise, some sixty years before, of "Isaac Webbe" and of "Hannah, Wife of the Above," also their children, who had apparently died almost as soon as they were born.

"From—my brother," he repeated, wondering why she was so frightened of the large-minded, generous head of the family. At his name she had seemed to collapse—there was no doubt on that point. "He wrote to me like the unselfish, noble fellow that he is! He told me that he had arranged all your affairs and St John's business, that there would be no bankruptcy, that, indeed, Dormer might return and resume his work any day if only one could get at him. He told me there was no obstacle to our marriage; on the



contrary, that I had only to see you and arrange everything—what is the matter?"

"This," cried Beryl, stormily. "I do not know why everyone wishes to force us upon each other, you and me, for our destruction. It must be some diabolical influence; it cannot be anything else. Anyhow, I don't care who wishes me to marry you, or what anyone will do to egg you on to making me marry you, for I do not intend to be your wife, or anyone else's. I don't care whether my marriage would help St John. I will not be married! I will never be married! If you like, if it would be any comfort to your offended vanity, I will swear here, as solemnly as you may direct, that I will never call any man husband as long as I live!"

She panted. Her eyes seemed to enlarge, and to gleam with an almost unnatural brilliance. He gazed bitterly at her. His love for her was more a passion than a sentiment, and her continued rebuffs, while they increased its intensity, strengthened its baser side until he asked himself, as he gazed at her, so pale, beautiful, alluring, yet so evidently impassible, whether at that moment his feeling for her was not nearer hate than love.

Then his better self prevailed. He chid himself for his "brutality." He recalled to mind a verse he had once said should be a law to every self-respecting man—

> "If she be not fair to me
> What care I how fair she be?"



"Look here, dear," he suddenly said, with less of homage but far more of honest, human kindliness than he had ever addressed her with. "I am not a bear, I hope, nor a tyrant! I do not want to force your will. And, if you could not care for me as a wife should for her husband, I would not have you at a gift! Meanwhile—you follow me, don't you?—my presence has not absolutely scared away your wits? I will not accept your 'Noes' at this juncture in our lives. I will give you time—"

"No, no!" she interrupted, and her voice sounded shrill in her anxiety to end this entanglement at once and for always. "Pray, pray, take my answer now. I don't want you to wait! I want you thoroughly to understand that I shall never feel differently—never! It is utterly and absolutely impossible!"

He smiled somewhat ironically. Wrath was in his heart—wrath not unmixed with wounded vanity. How foolish women were—how foolish among her sex was this winsome, lovely girl; to think to choke off a man by rough denials which only made them additionally attractive by lending the dash of piquancy to the love-chase!

"I have always thought you a child in mind and heart, now I know for certain that you are!" he returned, placably. "A child believes in its moods. It forgets—most things, particularly the fact that what it cared for yesterday has lost its



charm to-day, and what it likes to-day it will probably hate to-morrow! Besides, if you have so strong a will, I have a stronger. I will tell you this much, Beryl—if it pleases me to marry you I will marry you! Nothing you can do, nothing you can plan or scheme, will, or shall, prevent me!"

He spoke more and more insistently, and, as he said those last words a very ugly expression distorted his handsome features. His eyes, which were fixed on Beryl's, seemed at once and the same time to harden and recede. She felt a sudden fear of him—but too late. In another moment she was clasped in his arms, a long passionate kiss held her unwilling lips. Then he released her, and as she staggered back, incensed, outraged, he strode rapidly away, and leaping the low stone churchyard wall, was gone.

When the Vicar reached home he met Beryl in the garden. He noted that she looked pale and red-eyed, and began to sound her gently, in the hope that his suggestions might possibly have influenced her to relent in favour of the young man he honestly considered so desirable a suitor under the more or less painful and difficult circumstances. But she hardly seemed to hear him, or to appreciate the drift of what he said.

"I have been to the post," she volunteered, apropos of nothing in particular. "I have



thought over everything, as you told me to do, and the result was that I saw I ought to accept Lady Beard's situation. So I have written to say that I am ready to enter upon my duties any hour she may please to summon me."

Mr Dormer stopped short. "My dear, I am sorry you have been so precipitate," he began, as annoyed as so equable an individual could be. "Because — some time to-day— Captain Paulyn was coming to see you; he is staying at the Golden Lion at Moreton—"

"I have seen him, Uncle, and it is to avoid having to see him again that I am going to be Lady Beard's companion," said Beryl, quietly.



CHAPTER XIII

A FEW days later Beryl had taken leave of her uncle and aunt and the half-disdainful, half-commiserating Cynthia—who had quite settled down at the Vicarage, and was filling the *rôle* of spoilt child of the house to considerable perfection, prettily insisting on having her own way with the Vicar, who was too taken aback to combat her, and simply "lording it over the mistress," as the cook termed it, being herself an autocrat. As Beryl left her sister on the platform, nodding, smiling, and waving, with her uncle, looking serious and a little anxious, in the background, she told herself, as she settled into the corner of the railway-carriage, that she had done the right thing, not only in her own case, but that of others.

"Poor little Cynthia, she is so changed since that wretched young man jilted her!" she told herself with a sigh, totally unconscious of the truth, which was, that Cynthia had always been shallow, selfish—a human butterfly, only Beryl's love for her had rendered her unsuspicious of the fact. "It is much better that she should



settle down as their very own cherished pet, without my being there to seem a rival in their affections. Poor, dear Pearl is so quaint, original, and young, that the two will not clash. I am too serious for Cynthia!"

As the train rattled on, and lovely landscape succeeded lovely landscape, Beryl felt a little heartsick, and asked herself whether she was not one of those uncomfortable human beings who seem unable to fit in anywhere. Then common-sense, and her unquenchable spirit, came to her aid, like ready and well-equipped allies, and she determined resolutely that no difficulty should daunt her in her coming life, no dilemma prove more than she could surmount, no discomfort or annoyance successfully tempt her to look back, after putting her hand to the plough.

Still, she hardly thought or expected that these fine, and certainly firm, resolutions would be tested at the first set-off. But they were. Arriving at the station, the porter told her, with a grin which she resented, that "Sir 'Arry was below in the dogcart. If you don't know 'im, Miss, I may as well tell ye as 'e's a bit rough," the man added, with bucolic confidence, and a twinkle in his eye. "Oh! you do know 'im? That's all right, then. No offence, m'm, I 'ope? The cart's 'ere for the luggage. I'll see it's put in all right. Thank ye, ma'am—much obliged to ye, I'm sure."

Sir Harry was below to meet his wife's new companion. What did that mean? Beryl asked

herself, as she went slowly through the station and down the steps. She gave an anxious glance at her host as she reached the station yard. He was seated, motionless almost, on the driving-seat, whip in hand, gazing thoughtfully at vacancy. An old, shrivelled groom stood at the horse's head. His swift touch of the cap, as Beryl came up, aroused Sir Harry's attention.

"Here you are," he exclaimed briskly. "Can you climb up? Accustomed to high carts? That's right!"

Beryl sprang easily to his left—the old groom clambered to the back seat, and they drove swiftly off. In spite of Beryl's discomfiture at being met by her host instead of by Lady Beard or her carriage, she felt the old exhilaration of being perched up on high wheels and driving swiftly, meeting the pure, sweet air. Until they reached the high-road, and Sir Harry turned to the right where the sign-post bore witness that Ilkfield lay in the opposite direction, she felt nothing but that it was kind of him to fetch her, thereby tacitly approving of her appointment. But when he said he was going to take her a long drive, so that they could "have a talk and understand each other," she expostulated.

"Oh, please not, pray do not!" she exclaimed, with pleading emphasis, and an eloquent glance. He checked the horse so violently that it reared, then capered for a few moments. When he had reduced the mettlesome thoroughbred to a less perturbed condition, Sir Harry looked down at

her with a keen, inquiring look in his small, glittering black eyes.

"You must do one of two things, but you can choose," he doggedly said. "Drive back to the station and take the next train home, or come to an understanding with me before you enter my house!"

Beryl hesitated. For a few moments she felt rebelliously inclined to resent this cavalier treatment, and accepting his hint to return home. Then a certain spirit of opposition arose within her, together with a chivalrous remembrance of the lonely woman, friendless but for her cats, whose life she had resolved to share, and, if possible, to render brighter.

"I will do as you please, Sir Harry," she somewhat proudly returned.

"Oh, dear, no! It is to be as you please. You choose! Which is it to be? A drive and talk with me—or the station?" he retorted roughly.

She shrugged her shoulders, and looked sharply, firmly up into his red, obstinate old face. In the searching daylight of the open he looked older than when he stood before the hearth in the shady old hall at the Grange.

"You give me no alternative, since I have accepted the situation as Lady Beard's companion," she slowly said. "I must hear what you have to say. Meanwhile, you will kindly understand that I shall answer no questions that bear upon private family affairs in the hearing of a third person,"

She glanced significantly over her shoulder at the old groom.

He gave a short laugh, touched the bay very gently with the whip, and drove off, first along the high road, then into a side lane which wound up a heath-and-furze covered hill. When the horse slackened speed he spoke for the first time since he laughed.

"Old Stephen is as deaf as a post," he began. "Besides, I don't want to know your private affairs. You are the niece of a good man—I am sure he is that, in spite of his fads and new-fangled notions. No! I want to be a good friend to you, and warn you before you take up a position which may end in a couple of weeks, if you don't understand what you are going in for. My good girl, my poor wife is as mad as a hatter!"

"That I refuse to believe!" exclaimed Beryl, warmly. "To be fond of animals is no madness—nor, as a childless lady, to have them about her!"

"Perhaps not," he returned, and there was a sadness in his voice which belied his usual brusqueness. "But—to treat the one who loves you best in the world as your worst enemy, to oppose his liking, to thwart him from morning till night, to shut yourself away from old friends, and imagine all people who laugh and smile and make the utmost of that bad job at its best—our life on earth—rascals, fools, the dirt under one's feet, and after you have offended the whole county, to live

all by yourself, with a lot of dirty, disgusting cats —if that ain't being mad, I shall like to know what is! Why, Miss Dormer, my wife won't go near any of the old people in the village any more than she will see her own friends she used to set such store by. Then she does such things. She sets herself dead against hunting and fishing, and all sport. Indeed I don't know if having broods of young foxes destroyed, and employing low poachers to wring the necks of the young game, wouldn't get her punished by the law of the land! If that ain't being mad, then there ain't any mad people at all. The asylums can shut up shop!"

"Lady Beard is not any madder than you or I, Sir Harry," said Beryl, boldly. "She is unhappy, because she is misunderstood, and that is all! I feel it, I believe it, I could swear it!"

Although he did not speak at first, she felt, while her cheeks burned with the slight excitement of the unexpected encounter, that she had scored by her quick assumption of her future *rôle* of Lady Beard's champion, and heavily.

"I don't share your opinion, Miss Dormer," he presently began, slowly, hoarsely. "You have seen my wife certainly, but only once. I have lived this sort of fool's life, knowing her the laughing-stock of the county, or called 'loony' or 'softy,' for years! I might have shut her up, but I love her. If she was shut up I know I should go and hang myself on the nearest beam.

But I was told to be firm with her, and not indulge her wild whims like that silly nonsense of having those cats—so I have been firm. I was told to get her to go out to dinners and parties and things, but I can't do that. Still, when I saw you, it did cross my mind that you might! Do you think you could? She has taken one of her mad fancies to you, I can see that, and my young friend and comfort, my secretary, young Davenant, saw it too! He told me so. Do you think you could?"

"Could—what?" Beryl had been struck by the pathos of the old squire's last sentences. More than ever she felt that between the oddly-assorted couple there was more entire mutual misapprehension of each other's thoughts, feelings, and intentions, than lack of real affection. There had been a true ring in those dismal words of Sir Harry's, "If she was shut up I know I should go and hang myself on the nearest beam." She trembled a little as the squire replied.

"You are as pretty as they make 'em, don't mind my saying so. I ain't in a humour for paying compliments, worse luck! Yes, you're pretty, and what's more, you're a sort of gal as could half wheedle, half drag people into a lot of things they'd sworn they wouldn't do the very minute before. There aren't many of your sort, but when found they rule the roast, and no mistake, that's to say, if they know their way about. Men are easy game to them! They tumble at



once. I dessay, now, that if you were in a ball-room, and the men all knew you were a mere nobody, they'd leave every blessed woman and gal and come clustering about you like a swarm of bees about their queen. It's a rare power, 'pon my word! but it's worth having, because women knock under to it as well as the men. You've got it, my girl! You mayn't know it, but you may believe me! I am woman-proof, I am! From the very first moment I set eyes on my wife I was her slave—I wouldn't have looked at anybody else! I'm her slave now, this moment. I'd sell the very heart out of my body if it 'ud help her to shake off the silly rot of shutting herself up with those cats! But when I saw you coming into the hall with your hand on her arm, I said to myself, that's the girl that can do it! And by George, you will, if you choose! You'll lay hold of her mind, so to say, and you'll cosset her, and then, when I want her to go to the Hunt Ball and give a luncheon to the meet, she'll do it! I'll bet you anything she will!"

Beryl was on guard at the very first note of flattery. She met his gaze—appealing, anxious, firmly.

"I do not understand, Sir Harry," she gently said. "What is it you want me to do?"

"To get her to be as she used to be—the Lady Beard who kept open house, and was as hail-fellow-well-met with the gentry about as I am! She'd be the most popular woman in the county. She



was—she was a different woman before she had a fever, and began to read too much silly poetry and stuff. I couldn't stomach the rot, and I told her so, straight. That was the beginning of it all! But if you manage her, and amuse her, and get her to think less of those beastly cats and more of human beings, and coax her to go out, and ask people to the Grange, you'll be doing such a day's work that you'll deserve any good you can get out of life! I tell you this—you be like a daughter to my lady, and I'll be a father to you! You shall share my money I leave—oh, don't be offended! Ain't that like what your parson-uncle 'd be, if I said such a thing? Law, you can't work against family traits as they call 'em, you can almost put your finger on the father if you see the son! As I was saying—you be a good gal to me and my lady, and get her to behave like a woman in her position ought, and you'll never rue the day you came to Ilkfield! And now about this Hunt Ball. It's ten years since my lady came with me. I want you to be all agog to go, and then I believe she'll take ye, and they'll forget all the talk about her being against the hunt, and egging on poachers to do away with the foxes, putting a price on their heads. My word, what a woman! Yes, she'll take ye! and if she does, you shall have the very jolliest set of trinkets that ever came out of Bond Street! I promise you that much!"

"If I do what you wish, Sir Harry, or rather

try to, it must be understood that I will not accept a bribe," Beryl somewhat hotly said. "I did not come to Ilkfield for that!"

"Tut, tut—bless the gal! I know you didn't. Well, then, you'll remember that if you do things for me, I'll do what you want whenever you ask me! Will that do, eh?"

"Certainly! You are most kind—" began Beryl, a little taken aback by the youthful precipitation of the elderly baronet, when he interrupted,—

"When I said I'd do anything you wanted I meant anything in reason, you know," he anxiously added. "For instance, if you came to me and told me my lady had talked you over to her way of thinking about living with the cats and shunning everybody, you couldn't expect me to give in to that, could you, now? No, I thought you were a gal of sense. Besides, you can hold your own; and I am sure you've been well coached in what's the right thing to do and what ain't by that parson-uncle of yours! Then, if you wanted me to do away with my bull-dogs—well, you'd have to have that Mimi done away with first, I tell ye that!"

Beryl hastened to assure him that if she ever claimed his promise she would not approach him with any demand of that sort. "I might want to go home—I mean to my uncle's for a day or two—or something of that kind," she suggested, as the only thing she could think of to say on the



spur of the moment. "But, Sir Harry, now that I think I understand your wishes, and that I have undertaken to do my best to coax Lady Beard out and about a little, may we turn back?" she pleaded. "And I really don't know what I shall say to Lady Beard about driving off with you in this fashion! How can I tell her why you took me round—and what we talked about? She will think me a traitor, and your aider and abettor!"

"Oh no, she won't, for a very good reason," chuckled Sir Harry, good-temperedly, as he turned and began to drive back towards Ilkfield in obedience to her suggestion. "She won't know—she need never know! None of my people will tell her; they know better than that! I don't say they prefer me to her, but servants don't hold with mistresses who shut themselves up with cats. And she's out this afternoon. I sent her out with Horace—Mr Davenant, you know—to see a cat she gave to some people three months ago. The creature was ill. My lady was all agog — actually didn't resent my meeting you—left all sorts of apologies. But she'll ask questions? Not she! She'll be too cut up to do that! The cat died yesterday. I resuscitated it for the occasion to get this talk with you! You know she's got to that pitch that every blessed kitten is fussed with as if it was a child. That's what you have to get her out of."

Thus Beryl arrived quietly at the silent Grange, and was thinking over her strange reception by her host while she unpacked, when, at the sound of wheels below, she looked out, and saw Lady Beard arrive in a half-closed landau. As the carriage halted at the door she saw the secretary scan the windows. Their eyes met. He gave her a long, peculiar look, and slowly lifted his hat.

She shrank back with a feeling of distrust and aversion. "I believe that man dislikes me," she told herself. "I feel as if he is going to be my enemy! But why?"



CHAPTER XIV

LADY BEARD arrived home somewhat depressed, also incensed that Sir Harry should have made such a strange mistake on the subject of the late "Fluff."

"She was the dearest little creature. I hated to give her away, but I cannot keep them all," she told Beryl, seating herself in her bedroom, and evidently struggling to keep back tears. "I started off with all sorts of remedies, to find that she was buried yesterday. It was heart-breaking to see her empty basket, with its little rug. Do cheer me up, dear! You must try not to feel strange, and make yourself at home. I hope Sir Harry was properly civil."

Dinner, which Beryl had somehow expected would prove as trying a meal as that first luncheon, of which she had no pleasant recollection, passed off far better than she had dared to hope. She had dressed herself carefully and well in a pretty pale pink silk with a large crimson sash tied in a somewhat Japanese fashion, and an old-fashioned necklet of garnets and topazes set like flowers strung on a gold chain,



which suited the milky whiteness of her throat and neck. She felt that she had in a manner pledged herself to incite Lady Beard—to almost tempt her, as it were—to live a more ordinary, active and less eccentric life. So she resolved to cast all considerations to the winds and pursue that laudable end with a single mind.

Sir Harry was amiably attentive to his pretty guest as he presided at the head of the table and carved a sirloin. Lady Beard made a very apparent effort to talk like any ordinary hostess—and Mr Davenant was so tactful, and so unobtrusively on the alert to promote Beryl's comfort and put her at her ease, that she inwardly chided herself for her precipitate suspicions, and resolved to try to feel less aversion for a young man who was seemingly devoted to his patrons.

Indeed, any spectator of the *partie quarrée* around the old oak-table whose massive silver glistened whitely in the light of the numerous wax candles in the silver chandelier pendent from the carved ceiling—would have thought that a skeleton in the cupboard where those four were living was an impossibility. Even Lady Beard laughed now and then—a low, timid laugh, while Sir Harry jested with the young companion and challenged her to a game of billiards, which challenge she accepted after reference to Lady Beard, who smiled her ready acquiescence.

"I hope you don't mind, only I really hardly knew what to do," she said to her hostess, when



the two ladies had retired to the drawing-room. "Sir Harry seems in such a pleasant humour—"

"My dear, I am delighted that you and he should be friendly together," returned Lady Beard, cordially. "And now, come with me and see the darlings in bed. I always go in to say good-night to them."

Once more she placed her long white hand within Beryl's arm, and escorted her to a bedroom leading out of the corridor in which her own was situated—in fact, the room into which she led her young companion communicated with her bed-chamber. It was a curiously-furnished apartment. The brightly-polished parquetry was bare. The walls were destitute of ornament. In fact, the chamber contained nothing but a dozen miniature beds, ranged round the walls, with tiny white mats on either side of them. In these were curled up, in more or less profound slumber, Lady Beard's feline pets. Only the cat with the kittens occupied a large round basket in a corner remote from the others. A lamp was pendent from the ceiling, shaded with dark green silk.

Lady Beard stepped quietly, and spoke softly, as in a night-nursery of lightly-sleeping children. She gave a glance at each pet in turn, then returned to the drawing-room, where the butler was awaiting them. He was looking, so Beryl thought, somewhat confused.

"Sir Harry ordered coffee to be served in the billiard-room instead of here, my lady, and he told

me to say as you would find him there with Mr Davenant."

The old man actually reddened as he stammered the halting sentence, and no sooner was his last word uttered than he disappeared.

"You see—how he has taught the very servants to be frightened of saying anything to me," plaintively said Lady Beard, as she smiled sadly at Beryl. "I have not seen a game of billiards for years! But I shall quite enjoy seeing you play. Don't look so astonished and anxious. I never enter that room—how could I, when he didn't want me? But I cannot allow you to go alone! He knows he will have to be polite to me in your presence, dear—there is some comfort in that!"

Beryl thought it polite to make no comment. Instead, she exclaimed upon the beauty of various objects that met her gaze as they passed along the lighted corridors—fine old carvings in both ivory and wood, delightful paintings, rare bits of the finest china. A narrow staircase led down to the billiard-room, which had been built on to the old house by Sir Harry, "when he took it into his head that he could not do himself justice, as he calls it, in the hall," explained Lady Beard. It was a large, long room—with two full-sized tables, and a good many engravings and photographs on its walls. A raised divan ran entirely round the apartment. There was a blazing wood fire at the end opposite to the door by which the ladies entered. On the left of the hearth was a glass-



door leading to the conservatories. Near to this, a coffee-urn hissed pleasantly over its spirit-lamp on a table on which were cut-glass liqueur bottles. As Lady Beard entered, Sir Harry came up to her in knightly fashion.

"Will you pour out coffee?" he asked almost obsequiously.

"If I must, I will," she languidly said. She dashed Beryl's hopes by her bored air of entire indifference at first. In fact, although the girl was a good billiard-player, taught by St John—an amateur expert—and fitted for the game by her height, her lissomness of limb, delicacy and power of wrist, and clearness of sight, she scored little or nothing during the first hundred up with her host. Her hand trembled, she felt unnerved. Only when Lady Beard began to evince some slight interest in the play, and urged her on with little exclamations of annoyance which showed Beryl that she wanted her to win, if possible, did she recover somewhat of her usual form—succeed in everything she tried for, and make a longer break than any of Sir Harry's. The second hundred up showed Beryl as easy winner by twenty-eight points—a fact which produced unwonted elation on the part of Lady Beard, who gave her a warm embrace and told her "she was showing Sir Harry what the sex he despised could do," as they parted for the night.

The next few days passed uneventfully. Beryl was playing her game cautiously, if steadily. She

was at her hostess's elbow, as it were, from early morn till they separated for the night. She wrote a long and particular account at the end of the first week to her aunt. After describing the loveliness of the surrounding scenery, and her walks and drives with Lady Beard, the books she read aloud, and the evenings in the billiard-room, she added,—

"I have luckily succeeded in making friends with most of the cats, but I am afraid of those bulldogs. However, my dread of them—they growl when I pass them, Sir Harry says, only because they scent their hated cat enemies—is nothing to my fear of failing in my attempt to coax Lady Beard to take me to the Hunt Ball. This, I feel, is a crucial test whether I am to be a success here or not. If I fail in this, I honestly believe that I had better give it up and leave!"

The Hunt Ball was imminent, Beryl constantly reminded herself, and each day Sir Harry found an opportunity to ask her eagerly what Lady Beard had said about it.

"My dear sir, I must wait a little longer before I begin to ask favours," she replied, the day after she had despatched her letter to Deepdale.

"Bless my soul! If you're frightened of her, girl, get Davenant to ask—she'll do anything for Horace," he testily said, going off more huffily than she had seen him since their momentous interview on her arrival.

She stood still for a few moments—strangely

taken aback. Although the lanky, long-faced secretary had been almost ostentatiously amiable during those first days of her life at Ilkfield, she shrank from him, felt a stronger doubt of him, every hour. She had told herself again and again that she was foolish, unreasonable, and even unjust. The young man behaved in the most strictly unimpeachable manner. But she could not believe in him, do what she would. His oily, adulatory manner, the subtle flattery he whispered in her ear—flattery which to her seemed little else but sarcasm whenever he had an opportunity for an "aside"—suggested the serpentine, the hypocritical. Even when she took herself to task on the subject of Horace Davenant, truth compelled her to own that he did not ring true. It was almost impossible that he could be what he seemed.

And she was to ask him for his help! Horrible—impossible! That was her first thought. But the succeeding night, as she lay awake in the darkness and silence—the worry of that Hunt Ball keeping sleep away—she acknowledged to herself that unless she made a friend and ally of Horace Davenant, she could hardly hope to be a success in her new *rôle*.

Next day was Sunday. The pretty old church was the other side of the park. The Squire adhered to the habit of attending Morning Service, which had been strictly observed by his forefathers. On Sunday he eschewed the velveteen

and corduroy attire so disliked by his wife, to whom, she averred, it suggested "so-called game-keeping," and appeared in ordinary morning dress. The programme was, that he walked across the park with his secretary, wet or fine, while Lady Beard drove, either in her pony-chaise or single brougham. Naturally, Beryl accompanied her hostess—her "mistress," as she termed her to herself, although no one but herself had spoken the word in connection with her engagement as companion—in the carriage.

The church had been restored at Sir Harry's expense. Formerly a building disfigured by whitewash and filled with pews, it was now a typical old English village church — cruciform, with two aisles, a chancel beautifully decorated and furnished with old oak benches, restored, and a stained-glass east window. The four from the Grange occupied a front seat, and the Squire's bass, growling the responses, sounded an odd accompaniment to the intoning of the choir.

The service was carefully and reverently conducted. The Vicar preached a short, but eloquent little sermon on the shortness of human life and the narrowness and insignificance of human thought and feeling. Beryl, sitting close to a stone pillar to the left of Lady Beard, felt as if the benignant-looking old clergyman was preaching at and for her alone. He was severe when he chid the pride, vanity, and self-conceit of the poor human unit which thinks to stand alone,

work, succeed by its own efforts, unaided by its brethren. He spoke of the tiers upon tiers of creatures, animal and vegetable—and of the serried ranks of those higher beings as far as we can know and guess in the spirit world. In reality he was trying to show the dependence of human beings upon each other, as a kind of moral antidote to any Socialistic feeling excited by a recent lecture given in the open air against him and his teaching by a poacher just out of prison. But Beryl took the sermon to herself. When he said, "After all, my brethren, what are we but children in the nursery, with our Father in Heaven, our mother as well—and what would a good mother think of a younger child which disdained and refused an elder brother or sister's kindly help?" She bethought herself of Lord St George—of how intensely, although she had felt his goodness to the full, she had resented being succoured, saved from she hardly knew what trouble and disgrace by his timely help; of how she had enjoyed her repudiation of Captain Paulyn; of how she had gloried within herself at going out into the world to fight her way unaided, alone—yes, and defiant—and she knew that the preacher had touched a wound in her soul, that she had indulged in a pride which was the reverse of the humility of the angels and holy spirits—and then and there, inwardly abashed, she resolved to humble herself by following Sir Harry's advice, and asking Horace Davenant's help.

Nothing was easier. At least, in practice. As the quartette—Sir Harry and Lady Beard, herself and Horace Davenant—sat at luncheon in the fine old hall, the keen dark eyes of the secretary watched her stealthily as usual. She told herself honestly that he was seeking her as his ally, there was no need to make any advances to him. One glance of encouragement was all that was necessary. It cost her a struggle to give it. Hitherto her eyes had met his with chilliest reserve, if not antagonism. But when, the servants having retired, he asked her across the table in his deferential, obsequious manner whether he might cut her a small bunch of the huge, luscious grapes for which the head gardener was famous, she gave him a half smile of assent.

"Thank you," she gently said, but, as he handed her the grapes and she saw that his fingers shook, she felt a wave of inward horror rise and overwhelm her good resolution. Those grapes tasted like Dead Sea fruit. As she sat there she felt that she could not have anything to do with this repulsive young man. Then she sternly repressed her rebellious feelings with an intense effort of will.

"If I cannot do what I believe to be my duty, I am utterly worthless! she told herself with bitter self-contempt; and when Lady Beard rose, and proposed, as she had once or twice proposed before, that Horace should escort her

"about the place," she was not ready with an excuse as usual.

"I am afraid Mr Davenant has something much better to do," she returned half-heartedly.

"That would be impossible!" he warmly returned; and a very few minutes later Beryl, with the desperate, miserable feeling of one who is going dead against every inclination and emotion, was walking along the drive through the park, the secretary at her side.

"Where would you like to go, Miss Dormer?" the young man asked, in a gentle, if reproachful voice, after Beryl had walked a couple of hundred yards without vouchsafing him a look or a word. His eyes sought hers.



CHAPTER XV

"Oh, anywhere!" she exclaimed, with a glance of mingled distrust and despair. "I have to ask your help, that is all! It does not matter where! Here, or along the road, as I said—anywhere!"

"I am afraid something has annoyed you—I mean, is troubling you?" he returned, his dulcet voice attuned to a sympathy which Beryl told herself was counterfeit, and poor counterfeit.

"No," she said. "Only I have undertaken to persuade Lady Beard to do a certain thing, and —well, I cannot understand how I could be so utterly vain as to imagine that, stranger as I am, she would consent to waive prejudices, to go against her own wishes and feelings, at my suggestion!"

He stopped short. She halted also, a little astonished and certainly reassured. She was still more reassured when she saw his face, with its blank expression of mingled astonishment and incredulity.

"You mean to say she refuses to take you to the Hunt Ball?" he asked. "I can't believe it! You have misunderstood!"

The blood rushed violently to her face, hitherto pale with emotion—with her inward struggle to master her own feelings and inclinations.

"Who told you—that?" she asked dumbfounded.

"Sir Harry tells me most things, Miss Dormer!" he somewhat coldly said. "He has honoured me with his confidence since I first came. It has been a difficult position, mine—it needed a perfect Machiavelli, or one of his ilk, to deal with it satisfactorily, instead of a dolt in human science like myself. I am rejoiced you are here! You, I am sure, possess qualities—subtlety, resource, the art of concealing your own feelings, which, if we work together as firm allies, may end in bringing two estimable people to a better state of things. At present Sir Harry and Lady Beard are quite the talk and amusement of the country side."

Beryl shrank and winced at his suggestion. Allies—an alliance of two—and her ally Horace Davenant! Detestable idea!

"What do you mean, 'working together,' 'being firm allies?' I do not understand!" she asked, distantly.

"You yourself have suggested it—if not by word, by your condescending to allow me this *tête-à-tête*," he suavely said. "When you deigned to look kindly and speak civilly to me at luncheon, I knew you wanted my help. I thought you had proposed the Hunt Ball to Lady Beard,

and she had said 'No!' I never dreamt you were afraid of putting the question to her."

"I am not—afraid," she returned, inwardly writhing under his delicate sarcasm—the thinly-veiled scorn of his tone rather than his words. "At least, not afraid of asking Lady Beard, but afraid of failing in my first attempt to coax her out and about. It was Sir Harry who suggested your asking her—my referring to you!"

"Sir Harry honours me too far when he supposes her Ladyship would do more for me than for you," said Davenant, as if musing. "Honestly, would you like me to suggest the matter to her? I might do it in this way. She has taken an extraordinary fancy to you—it is of no use your saying 'No'—I know, and you don't! Her one and only fear is that dulness will drive you away from Ilkfield, disgusted with the life here. If I recommend her to take you to dances and dinners and the few entertainments going as a sure means of keeping you, she may probably do it. It remains for you to decide. Shall I speak to her, or will you?"

Beryl had been somewhat mollified by a certain change of manner since her truthful speech acknowledging Sir Harry's intervention. Davenant spoke last in an ordinary, kindly way, and as she glanced at him and said, "Thanks! I should be grateful if you would do it," he seemed less untrustworthy—his keen eyes gave her a straight, honest look.



"Then 'twere well it were done quickly!" he quoted. "We will not prolong our walk, I think, Miss Dormer, for there is just time for me to say a few words to Lady Beard before you and she start to drive. I suppose I may hope that if I succeed, and you do go to this ball, you will give me as many dances as you can spare?"

"Yes," replied Beryl, awkwardly. It was a high price to pay, she told herself, as, after returning to the house she went to her room until she would be summoned for the daily afternoon drive. But she could hardly refuse if Davenant so signally helped her in her first decisive move, although when she thought of his arm about her waist she positively shivered.

"There are sure to be some square dances; he shall have them," she told herself, deprecatingly. "Perhaps Sir Harry has friends who will wish to please him by asking me for dances, or enemies who will think to find out how they live here," she scornfully thought, enjoying the idea of successfully mystifying any such, and punishing them for their curiosity.

Was it her fancy, she asked herself, or a fact, that, when she descended to meet her hostess in the hall, in reply to the summons, or bell announcing that the carriage waited below, Lady Beard looked pale and distressed? She was certainly silent, and seemingly *distraite*, as they drove first along the high-road, then uphill and across some waste land to a village where a former servant

lived, who had asked for a kitten. Perhaps the kitten in the basket on Lady Beard's lap absorbed her attention. She certainly seemed more herself when they had visited the neat cottage, and had left the little creature with the kindly-faced, smiling old woman, who had been housekeeper at the Grange when Sir Harry was a boy, and who received the kitten with as much delight and homage as if it had been some enchanted princess who would suffer a speedy change, and be the foundress of some extraordinary good fortune.

"That old woman is really nice; I don't mind giving up little Ally to her," remarked Lady Beard, as the horses stepped mincingly downhill. The coachman resented the rough drive, and made the most of its difficulties. "How the carriage does sway, to be sure! My dear, I never mind making little sacrifices for people I really like and respect. I like and respect old Mrs Manners, so I give her little Ally, who has won my heart; she is certainly the flower of that latest flock of dear Patty's! I more than like and respect you, dear," she leant towards Beryl, and laid her gloved hand on her young companion's arm. "I am beginning to love you, to feel a little what I should have felt if I had been your mother—I might easily have been, you know, in respect to age—so I am going to make sacrifices for you! You are young, you are extraordinarily pretty—don't blush, it is no mere compliment—you cannot be expected to



live the dull, monotonous life I have chosen to live all these years. So, for your sake, because I cannot expect you to live my life, I am going to try to live yours! Don't look frightened—startled I should say, but be glad, because I am giving up one of the things which Sir Harry and I have fought over all these years—and not only merely giving it up, but giving it up royally! You know I have told you how I detest the idea of foxhunting—any kind of hunt which really means the persecution of the weak and helpless by the powerful and strong. Well, I am going to the Hunt Ball! What do you think of that? It will be a triumph for Sir Harry, a triumph which he never expected to have. But I don't care, I am doing it for you! The Marquis of Ivordale, the great man of the county, is on the committee. Everyone worth knowing will be there. *You* must be there!"

As Beryl listened, she felt almost like a traitor, and if she had not fought against the inclination to tell Lady Beard all, and exactly how this resolution of hers had been led up to, she might have successfully checked her hostess's departure from her former mode of life. But she held her tongue. She resolved to be passive, to allow herself to drift. It was, however, a very half-hearted "I?" which was the monosyllable with which she replied to Lady Beard.

"Don't look so worried, dear; I assure you, you will enjoy yourself. I was at the Hunt Ball years

ago, before Sir Harry had forgotten what it means to be kind to a wife, and I have never seen a prettier sight—all the hunt, or nearly all, in pink, and the ladies in white or delicate shades of colour which were not likely to clash with the crimson and green decorations. Lord Ivordale being Master of the Hounds, as well as a man of great taste, the ball is sure to be a success. He spares no expense or pains! And, my love, you must begin being a real daughter to me by letting me give you a dress! I shall write to my former dressmaker, Madame Violette, telling her to send down someone competent, who will suggest a pretty gown, and take your pattern. She has, I am sure, been thinking me dead. I have had nothing from her for so long! You will convince her to the contrary. I have my own idea of the dress. White satin, with some very delicate lace I will lend you, and knots of crimson velvet. Not a single jewel! Or if you and Violette think that a little too severe, just one single string of small pearls about your throat! I was meditating on the subject, dear, while we drove here, and I seemed to see you in imagination in your shining white silk with those crimson blotches, and you looked a dream of loveliness! Don't blush, and don't say I am good to you! I am not good to you! If I were, do you know what I should do?"

The change in Lady Beard's manner from a certain pathetic exultation—the tempered jubila-



tion of one rejoicing in self-sacrifice—to a deprecatory, almost warning sadness, roused her young companion from her almost miserable confusion.

"Oh, what?" she pleadingly asked.

'My dear child, I would not keep you here; I would send you back into the world," she returned, with an affectionate glance. "Young, sweet, as you are, you would have the pick of husbands! What do you say? You never mean to marry? Absurd! My child, if I were a man and liked betting, I would bet any amount that if you were launched in society—society with a capital S, of course—the *crême de la crême*, you would make the finest match of the season!"

"My dearest lady, I never wish to have a husband," returned Beryl, with an almost passionate glance into her hostess's face. "I do not care how good and high-minded he might be, the day would come when he would let me feel he had made sacrifices for me, and I had it not in my power to do the same for him!"

"You are proud," exclaimed Lady Beard, "but I don't quarrel with you for that! although, I am afraid, it is partly my pride which makes me get on so badly with my poor Harry."

And thus the crucial conversation ended. Beryl failed to discover how Sir Harry and

his wife came to terms anent that projected ball, whether they communicated with each other through Horace Davenant, or "had it out" in some stormy scene unknown to the household. Davenant himself absorbed her thoughts to a great extent. He seemed to change, gradually, slowly, but surely. His attentiveness was more constant. He watched her more, to her horror, as a lover might do than as a friendly ally. Of the antagonist there was nothing left.

The dressmaker came from London, and returned the next day with a pattern literally made upon Beryl's figure. Lady Beard seemed to be greatly amused and interested, so Beryl stood patiently while the agile, bright little Frenchwoman sent by Madame Violette first pinned, then sewed the linen garment upon her. The evening before the ball the *toilette* arrived, and Pearson unpacked the glistening white garment while Beryl was dressing for dinner, arranging it on a dress-stand with little ejaculations of admiration. Then she insisted on fetching her mistress, who was as pleased with the finery as a child with a new toy, and proposed that her young companion should try on her splendour after dinner. But Beryl begged off being made an exhibition of to Sir Harry and his secretary, which was evidently Lady Beard's intention. She felt that it would be trial enough the following night to be looked over by those gimlet



to a show that he believes will
told herself in disgust.



CHAPTER XVI

It was the night of the Hunt Ball. Beryl stood before her long glass and stared at her reflection in genuine amazement.

It was only herself—she knew that. She knew her own face, and was so tired of it that it was hard to believe that she was, in some people's eyes, sufficiently attractive to be deemed beautiful, handsome, pretty, according to taste. But "I do not look in the least like myself," she thought, puzzled, as she gazed at a slight yet rounded form in a white satin robe falling gracefully to the ground in rich, gleaming folds from a slender waist, at the soft white neck rising from billows of lace and crimson knots, at the pearl-surrounded throat supporting the face which would have looked more like Beryl Dormer's as it was, but for the elaborate puffs and curls of glistening hair artistically piled about the small, well-shaped head.

"Dressmaking is an art after all, if it can transform a common-looking, ordinary girl like me into *that*," she told herself, as she tied on her swansdown-trimmed cape, and went down,

where Lady Beard was seated in the hall alone, cloaked, her head wrapped in lace, her face pale and set.

"They have gone on in the brougham—we are driving in the landau," she said, in a melancholy tone. She looked so martyr-like that, with a sudden glow which was singularly like hope, Beryl offered to "stay at home."

"Do let us! I am sure you are not fit to go!" she eagerly exclaimed. "I don't mind! I would really much rather stay at home! Let us send the carriage back to the stables, and have a nice, quiet evening together," she added, as she heard the grating of wheels on the gravelled drive.

But Lady Beard blushed as she shook her head. "I am an old silly, dear; you must not mind my nonsense!" she said; and presently they were packed into the roomy landau, and driving off into the darkness, the carriage lamps flickering fitfully on shrubs, trees, hedges, making weird, fantastic pictures of spots which by daylight were bucolic but ordinary.

"I shall be all right as soon as I am there," said Lady Beard, as they drove swiftly along the broad high-road leading to the county town. "But after staying at home so many years, and seeing hardly anyone, I feel awkward, as people feel stiff playing games they have left alone for a long time, or using their limbs again after lying down for months or years!"

"Of course," returned Beryl, caressingly. She

felt grateful to the woman who was so generously ignoring her own inclinations, conquering herself indeed for the young stranger within her gates, who had no claim upon her except that of being a young fellow-creature earning her living—and this feeling seemed to dominate the rest. In trying to be agreeable to Lady Beard during that dark, lengthy drive, Beryl forgot her own disinclination to face a public room full of strangers—to make one of the gay crowd and act a similar gaiety—and to dance. She, the sister of the absconding criminal, St John Dormer, to dance—to dance and simulate merriment while he might be dead, dying, or starving in some hiding-place, if he had still succeeded in eluding the police!

It was grotesque—horrible. "But I am not here for myself, but for Lady Beard," Beryl somewhat miserably told herself, as the landau fell into line, then halted at the door of Moreton Town Hall in a blaze of light from within the the building as well as from the illumination—the Royal Arms and Prince of Wales's Feathers in flaring gas above the stone portico.

The hall of the civic erection was all crimson cloth and green. Laurels and aloes in green tubs, with here and there an attenuated orange-tree bearing shrivelled little specimens of yellow fruit which would have been disowned by their natural brethren flourishing in a warmer clime, formed barriers between which the guests passed to the grand staircase—crimson-carpeted and decorated.

As Lady Beard and Beryl ascended with a small crowd, Beryl saw the Squire and his *aide*, Horace Davenant, awaiting them in the vestibule above; and after the four had met, and she and her chaperon had left their wraps in the cloak-room, she found, to her dismay, that she was left with Horace to follow Lady Beard, who was being escorted to the ballroom on her husband's arm.

"You must feel very proud of yourself," he murmured in her ear, in so caressing a voice that she almost hated him. "You have accomplished a work no one else has even dared to aspire to! The county will be so flabbergasted by the appearance of those two—here—in Darby and Joan fashion, that it will be the sensation of the year!"

"It was you who brought Lady Beard here; I had literally nothing to do with it, Mr Davenant," said she, with a tartness which would have discouraged any ordinary young man.

But Horace Davenant glanced at her beautiful face, her lovely form, with a peculiar smile, which meant content as well as security—and other sentiments.

"You are too modest," he suggested, tenderly, just as they reached a curtained doorway, beyond which was a blaze of light—and a quaintly-dressed damsel in a mob-cap and dainty apron approached them and offered ball-cards, of which he accepted two. "Here is your card, Miss Dormer," he went on, handing her one with a

courtly bow. "But I must remind you of your promise that I am to have several dances. Will you tell me which among these I may look forward to?"

Here the orchestra within began the prelude to a well-known popular waltz. The melody seemed to sting Beryl. It was so hard to be here, she felt, under the circumstances! She had never dreamt of entertainments, balls, or gaiety of any sort when she resolved to earn her living—but had hoped that in the routine of a quiet, dependent life she might learn to endure the past, and cherish hopes of a better future. The sweet, plaintive strains seemed to bring a knot in her throat.

"Oh—any—so long as they are not waltzes, or round dances!" she hopelessly said, yielding her card to him. "I can only dance Lancers and that sort of thing. I really don't care to go twirling about—it makes me so giddy."

"Dance this first polka with me—that will not make you giddy," he suggested persuasively. "No? Then I must ask for all the square dances there are—there are very few, by the way. You might dance that one polka—"

"Oh, very well, I will!" cried she, seeing Lady Beard hesitating in the doorway, and Sir Harry evidently urging her to enter the ballroom, and breaking away from him, she was at her hostess's elbow and in the room in one bound.

The large room of the Moreton Town Hall was lofty and airy, but had no claims to beauty



of architecture. But on this occasion the chief patron of the hunt and most important man in the county, the Marquis of Ivordale, had determined that the utmost should be done to secure a picturesque *entourage* for the yearly ball of the hunt upon which he spent so freely. The buff-tinted walls were concealed by crimson drapery—while crimson festoons above this high dado were crowned alternately with electric wall-lights and foxes' brushes and vizards. Beneath these were banks of hot-house plants and shrubs, and the crimson-carpeted daïs at the end of the room was surrounded by palms, ferns, and other graceful greenery. The musicians were in the gallery above, where the Royal Arms hung conspicuously upon an artfully-arranged background of national flags. Altogether, the picture, with a scattered crowd of pink and black coats with their delicately-attired partners — girls and young matrons had had the good taste to wear frocks which would not clash with the "pink" of the members of the hunt—appealed to the beauty lover—and as Beryl gazed at the brilliant, moving crowd a natural exhilaration tempered her sombre, memory-haunted humour. She accompanied Sir Harry and Lady Beard to the daïs, where they were warmly welcomed by the county magnates already seated there, feeling that it was good for Lady Beard to be here, also that she ought never to have given up the mild entertainments of the countryside. Little wonder that,

self-deprived of the companionship of men and women, she had sought that of the lower animals!

"One feels, when one is in a place of this kind, that man is a gregarious being—is not intended to live alone," she said with almost enthusiasm to Lady Beard, after she had contemplated the variegated, oscillating crowd with a peculiar sense of gratification.

Lady Beard sighed. "Ah, my dear, you are still young!" she somewhat mournfully replied.

"I see you are pleased with the scene, Miss Dormer. You do not regret having made up your mind to take the plunge!" said Horace Davenant, in Beryl's ear. "This is the polka you promised me—the one concession to the old-fashioned and conservative. Will you accept my arm? We can start from the corner just below, where the crowd does not come!"

Unwillingly Beryl left the daïs with him—most unwillingly she allowed him to encircle her waist with his arm. As she danced, she felt more and more stifled and oppressed by his proximity. Instead of becoming accustomed to his nearness his touch thrilled her with renewed aversion. She would have promised much if she could have pushed him from her. Indeed, to continue dancing until the end of the polka needed a strong effort of will—and at last she rebelliously told herself "she could do no more." She suddenly stopped, and shrank back against the wall.

"I told you I could not dance round dances;

they make me giddy!" she tartly exclaimed. Her cheeks were flushed. But as she looked into his face the crimson faded—she grew pale. His eyes were fixed on hers with a strange intensity. His set features were livid. The veins stood out on his moist forehead. Altogether Beryl felt that the man was the prey of an emotion she could not fathom.

"I will not ask you to dance a round dance again," he quietly said—so quietly that although his voice was husky she was a little reassured. "Let us take a turn outside this abominably stifling room. I feel giddy myself. There is no proper ventilation. It would have been better if the ball committee had seen to that first, and made decoration of second importance, which it really is."

"Still, the place looks wonderfully picturesque," said Beryl, reassured by his remark, and telling herself that the "stuffiness" of the room had made Davenant look so odd and livid.

"The picturesque is called upon to cover a multitude of sins!" he lightly said, walking along the room. "It is the most insanitary cottages that are the prettiest—the most attractive old mansions the most dangerous to health, and even life! We had better change the air, Miss Dormer, before we dance any more! Let us get out into the corridor."

He lifted a heavy red curtain, and Beryl passed into a long corridor hung at intervals with engrav-



ings of old buildings and portraits of former mayors—but otherwise bare.

"They might have had the *nous* to put a few chairs here," he complainingly said. "But when you have to do with provincial committees you must expect to say good-bye to common sense! Perhaps they have left us a seat or two in the vestibule."

He started to walk along the corridor, and Beryl reluctantly accompanied him. But the vestibule, she thought, was a far better place to be *tête-à-tête* with this young man she disliked and distrusted than a lonely corridor. In her heart she gratefully apostrophised the abused committee. At the end of the corridor there was a door. Davenant opened it for her to pass in, and she did so—to her surprise finding herself in an empty room lighted dimly by a couple of gas burners—a room carpeted with cocoanut matting, with a large table in the centre, on which stood a big decanter of water surrounded by thick glass tumblers. Heavy chairs were ranged along the walls.

"We have come the wrong way; this is a board-room or something," said Davenant, following. "But how delightfully cool after the ball-room! Do you mind waiting while I drink a glass of water, Miss Dormer?"

"N-no," she somewhat reluctantly said, halting at the door. "But I hope the water is fresh! I would not trust to it if I were you!"

"I am a pretty good judge, I assure you," he

said, going to the table, pouring water from the heavy decanter into a glass, and holding it to the light. "But I must taste it carefully. If you don't sit down I shall bolt it, and take the risk!"

"Oh! I don't mind sitting down," she returned, suiting the action to the word. He raised the glass slowly to his lips, looking over it at her as he sipped its contents as if he were toasting her—then, as she winced and gave an involuntary sigh, he set it down and came towards her.

"I am glad we came in here. It is just the sort of place where we can have a talk which may lead to great results for us both," he said, dryly, drawing a chair close up to hers, and seating himself upon it. Thus he and his chair were an effectual barrier between Beryl and the door.

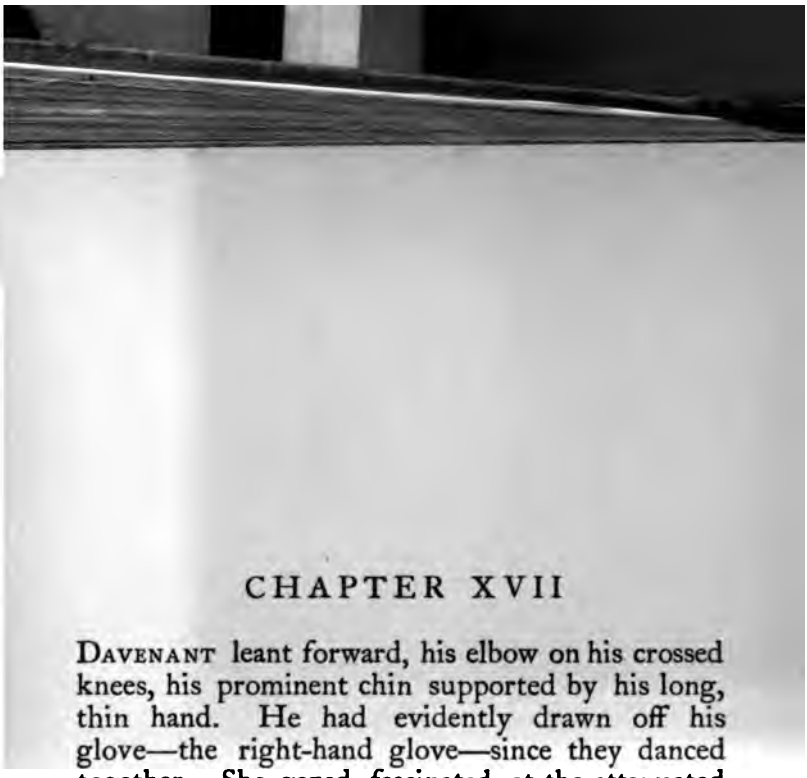
For one moment she felt a sensation more like fear than any emotion she knew. She glanced askance at his long, handsome face. It was pale, stern—but there was nothing alarming to be read in its somewhat inscrutable expression. She gave up her first idea of "making a bolt for her freedom." The secretary looked so grave, so much in earnest.

She leant back as far as she could against the hard, straight chair-back. "Yes?" she returned, as nonchalantly as she could bring herself to speak. How she mentally anathematised her traitor voice for failing her, and trembling!



"Yes," he began, in a deep tone. "It is quite time that we should come to a definite arrangement." He looked at her. There was a sinister expression in his deep-set eyes—they looked intensely black and shining. She seemed to remember eyes like those, staring at her like that in some forgotten dream. She lost heart, and chid herself angrily for it.

"I do not understand you, Mr Davenant," she coldly said. She could command her eyes—she gazed fearlessly at him, almost with a dumb challenge in those beautiful orbs which had already captured and retained as lovers several other men—but again her voice refused obedience. It sounded strange in her own ears—toneless, husky. "I do not know what you mean by a 'definite arrangement,'" she added, feebly.



CHAPTER XVII

DAVENANT leant forward, his elbow on his crossed knees, his prominent chin supported by his long, thin hand. He had evidently drawn off his glove—the right-hand glove—since they danced together. She gazed, fascinated, at the attenuated white hand on which the blue veins stood out, at the long, bony fingers.

"You know as well as I do, what I mean!" he began, in a clear, sibilant voice. "You know that if I had not 'fallen in love,' as they call it, with you at first sight, you would never have been engaged, by my special advice, as Lady Beard's companion! When you appealed to me for help—it was a tacit acknowledgment that you knew how I felt, and that I might proceed to take the necessary steps to bind you to me—"

"How dare you say such a thing!" she cried, aroused, awake, strong in her anger—her just anger, as she told herself. "Love me, indeed! You insult me, sir! But you shall not have the opportunity of doing it again! I will speak to Sir Harry. It was he who made 'a definite arrangement,' as you call it, with me! What

do you think he will say when he hears how you have taken advantage of me — of my position under his roof?"

He laughed. It was so Mephistophelean a laugh that she shuddered.

"I hope you are as unsophisticated as you profess to be," he easily said, gazing satirically at her. "You will suit me down to the ground! I had my doubts of you before you came that first day — little wonder!—a girl who would apply for a situation in answer to that crazy advertisement! I have my doubts of your absolute *bona fide* still. But I mean to have you —your charm, your beauty—for my very own! I said so to Sir Harry as soon as I found it would suit me to marry you. He was delighted! He said, 'Go in and win, my son!'"

"I think you must be—well—out of your mind, Mr Davenant!" she expostulated. Her thoughts were a-whirl, her emotions paralysed, by this sudden revelation of totally unexpected difficulties. "It is impossible, to begin with, that you can make up your mind on the subject of a wife after so short an acquaintance as ours—"

She gave a low, terrified cry—for pushing back his heavy chair, he suddenly flung himself on his knees, and leaning against her, clasped both her slender wrists in a grip of steel.

"Bah!" he exclaimed. "You belong to me—do you hear? I have taken you—'annexed' you, as they say! You cannot bear me—I know

that! But you will have to put up with me as a husband—I tell you that much—and love will come—only give me time!"

At first she had struggled feebly to free herself—she felt as numbed as a creature under the spell of nightmare—but suddenly she seemed to regain her strength. She writhed herself free, stood up, looked imperiously into his eyes.

"Let me go!" she cried. "Do you hear, let me go!"

For answer, he stood against the door.

"All in good time," he suavely said. He seemed absolutely unruffled, and she hated him for the fact. "First, let me, in my senses, represent to you—in your unreasonable, hysterical state—what will happen if I do let you go in your present humour. You will practically quash your chance of future respectability! For I am your chance! Oh, you need not glare defiance and hatred—I shall have you at my feet directly! Listen"—he went nearer, and hissed the next few words into her ear—"I know where your brother St John is, I know every detail of his crime, and if you quarrel with me, or if you say one word against me to living soul, to-morrow will see him lodged in gaol."

Was it some awful dream? Could it be real?

Beryl staggered back panting, white as death, speechless, gazing at her torturer as she might

have gazed into Hades suddenly opening beneath her feet.

"You would make a lovely statue," he coolly remarked, staring critically at her white, agonised face, at her beautiful, horror-stricken eyes. "And if you die reasonably young you will be an exquisite corpse. I am sorry you feel as you do about me. Perhaps you will like me a little better when I tell you that your brother and I were great chums at school, and were afterwards friends, until he played me a dirty trick —one of his initial steps in crime."

"Friends!" she scornfully gasped. "Friends!" She clasped her hands—wrung them.

"An outraged friend is a dangerous enemy," he said. "But I am quite ready to drop all enmity to your brother if you are amenable, if you consent to be engaged to me with a view to marriage. A marriage with you will suit my plans; besides, I mean to have you. It may only be a whim, but as it falls in with my other ideas I intend to gratify it. You will marry me, for I can prove to you that not only your brother—I daresay you despise him, little wonder—is at present at my mercy, for I have hidden him, but your name, your family name, your honour, reputation, all that—"

Beryl gave a low moan. "If you say much more I tell you this—you will send me mad," she passionately exclaimed. "Give me time! That is all I beg—I crave—give me time."



He looked curiously at her. If he "gave her time," as she termed it, might she not circumvent his plans? Hardly. They were too subtly schemed, too deftly laid. He had watched her, had assured himself that her love of life was strong. The bird would not escape the net by self-strangulation.

"I will give you time, plenty of it," he coolly said, advancing towards her, and taking one of the hands hanging limply at her sides. He had meant to kiss it, lightly, respectfully, and with a few words of caution to allow her to depart. But she snatched it from him with such violence, with a muttered "Demon! Dare to touch me!" that, with suddenly roused passion, he seized her in his lithe, muscular arms, and kissed her, vehemently, repeatedly, on lips, throat, neck, until, with a desperate effort, she flung him from her and rushed away.

Away, along the cool corridor, half maddened by the terrible interview. Where was the door by which they had left the ballroom? She had run too far along the passage, seemingly, for where she had expected to see it there was the blank white wall hung with portraits of pompous-looking men. Then she started, for at her left a door suddenly opened, and two men came out. The first was a tall, commanding-looking old gentleman, with a shock of iron-gray hair and a Wellington nose, the other she could not see.

The old man stopped short in surprise.

"What are you looking for, madam?" he deferentially asked. "This is the room set apart for those who wish to play cards, and smoke—"

"Oh, can you show me the door which leads into the ballroom," she had piteously begun, when she stopped short. A well-known voice said, "Miss Dormer!" and the man behind the old gentleman stepped forward and grasped her cold, trembling hands. It was Lord St George.

"This is Miss Dormer, Lord Ivordale," he said, with a pleased, almost proud, air, as he gave her a quick glance up and down.

Everything seemed to swim around her as Lord Ivordale said a few amiable words, and half-banteringly pointing out a door a few yards ahead, added, "you will like to take Miss Dormer back to the room, St George," and, wondering what had happened to the unmistakably pretty and aristocratic-looking girl to make her look like a criminal the minute after hearing the death sentence, returned to the ballroom by the door Beryl had left it by.

"Something is wrong," began Lord St George, gazing anxiously at her, as, the pressing need for self-possession over, Beryl swayed, recovered herself with difficulty, then gazed pitifully up at the one man in whom she entirely believed, whom she trusted "all in all." "Come, tell me—"

"No, no, not here, pray, pray let me go back

to Lady Beard, the lady who brought me here," she stammered, with a furtive, fearful glance back at the half-open door at the end of the corridor, for she dreaded seeing the hated figure of her enemy, and she was trying to wrench her hand from his determined clasp when he drew it through his arm, and began to walk in the other direction.

"Presently—all in good time, I will restore you to your *chaperon*," he kindly said, as he gently pulled her along the corridor. "But you must first have some refreshment. You have had a fright—a scare—don't deny it! It is possibly some imaginary danger, but it has been a fright just the same!"

They had reached the end of the passage. He opened a door—she was on his left arm—and Beryl saw a square room—really the smaller hall used for private dances and modest entertainments—now decorated with crimson and green foliage dotted about with tiny coloured lamps, and furnished with a number of tiny tables with snowy cloths prettily laid for supper. A buffet at the end was presided over by a number of young women wearing old-world mob caps and aprons, like those of the programme-girls. They and the buffet and tables looked pretty in the subdued light of the coloured lamps and the festoons of Japanese lanterns hung on garlanded ropes across the room just below the ceiling.

"I see a quiet corner," said Lord St George—

and he led her across the room and ensconcing her behind a small round table on a cushioned settee placed against the wall, he left her, and, as she was wondering, miserably, at the calamity which had befallen her—literally, she thought, a mad, unconscious rush into the very arms of her brother's unscrupulous enemy — he returned, followed by quite a dainty white-capped maiden, who gave her a sweet smile as she placed the contents of her tray one by one upon the table—a bottle of champagne and tiny sandwiches, with plates, and glasses half full of the creamy fluid just released from its years of imprisonment—and asked, "Anything more, sir?" before she tripped gracefully away.

Lord St George seated himself resolutely on the chair opposite Beryl, and filling both glasses, spoke in as resolute a voice.

"Eat and drink while I speak!" he began, more peremptory in manner and tone than she thought it was in the man to be. "Until you have eaten something, and have drunk that wine, I will not allow you one word of self-defence! You need not open your eyes like that—I repeat it, self-defence! For of all the rebellious, contumacious, difficult, unreasonable, and hare-brained human beings I have met, you are out and out the worst!"

He leant back and watched the effect of his speech, which he intended to both rouse and anger her into self-betrayal. It had at least some

effect. Her eyes rounded and gleamed. Her white neck heaved until the lace about it trembled.

"You expect me to eat while you talk like that, my lord?" she scornfully asked, gazing half in bitterness, half in secret delight and relief at the clear, well-cut features, the dark, luminous eyes of the man she ranked far and away above all others of his sex.

"Life has taught me—well — not to expect overmuch from anyone or anything!" he returned—then, fearing, as she blushed and winced, that he had wounded her—he was really not even thinking of her miserable brother—he smiled, and coaxed her more gently to at least sip the champagne.

"It is good wine; everything is of the best when my old friend, Lord Ivordale, has a finger in the pie! I expect you were astonished to see me? He has a house-party staying at Stretfield Court," he went on. "I have a standing invitation there, so, hearing from your uncle exactly where you were, I took advantage of it, and accompanied them here to-night. Lady Ivordale is anxious to know you; she used to know Lady Beard. She was amazed to hear she was coming out of her shell again! Sir Harry is telling everyone you have done it! Lady Ivordale is now asking her to spare you to us for a few days. You will come? To please me?" He looked kindly, searchingly, into her eyes.

Beryl's heart gave a wild leap. She paled with mingled pleasure and dread of her own emotion—so intense in the presence of this man. As she sat and listened to his voice she seemed to care for nothing but the fact that he was here, she was near him.

"If you wish me to go, my lord, I will go," she said, almost sadly. Then a sudden idea, repellent, almost hateful, flashed across her mind. "Unless your brother will be there," she added, bitterly, averting her eyes. Why, why was Lord St George so set upon her marriage to his brother? It was cruel, even more cruel to Roland Paulyn than to herself. Then she started. He was leaning forward, gazing at her.

"Beryl, answer me one question," he began, in a low, earnest tone. "Is it the Paulyns you hate, or is it only poor Roland?"

She turned eagerly, almost passionately, towards him.

"Hate?" she asked. "Why I love the very name of Paulyn! It's yours—" she stopped—her voice faltered. "Yours, who have saved St John from prison—saved our name from utter disgrace. Oh! surely you know I feel bound to do anything, anything you may ever ask me to do?" She stopped short, startled by her own impetuosity as well as by a queer little smile that hovered about his finely-cut lips.

"Suppose I were to ask you to marry Roland?" he began banteringly. "No, don't look horrified,

my dear child, I am not in the least likely to do that, for his sake as well as yours, for a loveless marriage is the greatest misery which can befall a human being. No! I am sorry, but it cannot be helped. However, I have plenty of little favours to ask you apart from anything connected with Roland! You have granted me one already. You have said you would accept Lady Ivordale's invitation. You did, did you not? I thought so. My next request is, that you will tell me the cause of your agitation when we ran up against you in the corridor just now."

She leant back and looked at him, recalled from she hardly knew what joyous emotional attitude to the chill level of anxiety and dismay.

"Oh dear," she involuntarily said. "I was almost forgetting! A horrible person insulted me, someone who professed to know all about St John's doings, and worse—to know where he is now—a person who threatened me with—with—betrayal of him—"

She stopped short, aghast at the effect produced upon Lord St George by her words. His smile had vanished. He was stern, pale, grave, almost alarming. He leant forward again.

"That must have been a woman! No man, except a blackmailer, is capable of such a thing! Tell me, the person cannot be here—to-night?" he asked eagerly. His eyes seemed to scintillate.

Should she tell him all? was the question. Immediately she answered herself in the negative.

She had seen enough of Horace Davenant to know that he was unscrupulous, that he would not hesitate to injure St John, therefore herself, if defied.

"I must not, cannot tell you," she murmured miserably, hanging her head. "But there is no doubt that my unfortunate brother is at the mercy of an enemy, and a bad one."

In vain Lord St George, disturbed, almost unhinged, by what she had betrayed, cross-questioned her as deftly as he knew how. Beryl held to her determination. Then the ingress of couples in search of refreshment from the ballroom rendered a further *tête-à-tête* without being overheard a difficult matter. Lord St George rose, pushed back his chair, and offered her his arm.

"Come and be introduced to Lady Ivordale," he said, more coldly than he had yet spoken to her.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE man she revered, almost worshipped, was angry with her, and to a certain extent with justice!

That was Beryl's predominant feeling as Lord St George escorted her, silently, ceremoniously, from the refreshment-room to the hall where the dance was still at its full height.

How deliciously, joyously happy she would have been, she thought, appearing publicly before the county magnates with her benefactor, if it had not been for Horace Davenant and his threats! As it was, the proximity of her "king among men" had lost its potency. As she glanced timidly up at his profile, which looked stern as that of any bust of an imperial Cæsar, she felt faintly but abjectly wretched. The ballroom, with its clashing music, its gyrating crowd of pale tinted frocks dotted here and there with the scarlet coats of the members of the hunt, producing the effect of a variegated flower-bed with blotches of red geranium swayed by the wind, oppressed her. As Lord St George piloted her along the crimson-hung walls, under the

brushes and vizards, and skirting the pyramids of blossoming plants so as not to destroy the lovely blooms, she had but one consolatory thought. She might see him soon again at Lady Ivordale's. But what if Lady Beard was loth to let her go?

"I must have her consent to-night before that cruel Mr Davenant knows," she thought, as Lord St George led her up the crimson cloth-carpeted steps of the daïs, where her anxious eyes detected a beautiful, middle-aged woman in red rose-coloured brocade, rich white lace, and garlands of roses, a tiara of pearls and diamonds on the wreath of snowy curls that accentuated the bloom of her youthful-looking complexion, seated by Lady Beard. Lord St George pointed her out as the Marchioness.

Both ladies glanced at the couple as they approached—the handsome Lady Ivordale put up her long-handled eyeglasses; Lady Beard, who looked more animated than Beryl had imagined she could look, nodded and smiled.

"Lady Ivordale wishes to know you, child," she said. "This is my kind young friend and my delightful companion Miss Dormer—Lady Ivordale."

Lady Ivordale dropped her glasses, and shook hands amiably with Beryl. Then she drew her rose brocade train closer, discovering a cane chair, and, asking her to sit by her, began to talk cheerfully and pleasantly. Beryl soon felt as if

she had known this gracious great lady months, or even years, instead of minutes, and presently, to her own surprise, found herself speaking of her dead parents, whom Lady Ivordale had met in her girlhood.

"You see, we may almost call ourselves old friends instead of new acquaintances," said Lady Ivordale presently. "To have known the mother is almost to have known the daughter, is it not? And you are so like her! Besides, we have a mutual dear friend in your great admirer, Lord St George, have we not?"

Beryl started and stared at her. Could she have heard aright? "I beg your pardon—you said—" she stammered interrogatively, before she had had time to reflect upon the unwisdom of taking her ladyship's banter seriously.

Lady Ivordale smiled discreetly, and leaning a little aside, gave Beryl's gloved hand a playful little tap with her fan.

"My dear, I have been laughing at him, good fellow! He seems in love with the whole family," she said. "Has he told you what has been the principal cause of his visit to us? Don't blush! I see he has! Come, you will give pleasure to the poor fellow—he has been a lonely, eccentric creature hitherto, and it is really a charity to help him out of his hermit groove—you will give pleasure to us also, and stay for my little dance next Wednesday? I will fetch you on Monday, if that will do—and take back both

you and a wonderful kitten Lady Beard has promised me! Don't say no, dear—I can see you hesitate. You will not regret coming, I assure you! And—I did not mean to tell you—we have a nice little surprise for you when you arrive. Don't ask me to tell you what it is, for I have promised to keep it a secret. It is Lord St George's doing—oh, here he comes! My dear St George, thank you for a very pleasant renewal of an old friendship. I told you that I knew Miss Dormer's parents, and I have been telling her that to know the mother is to know the children. She had kindly promised to pay us a visit—what do you say, my dear?"

Beryl had almost interrupted with an involuntary exclamation of denial, but at that moment she met St George's eyes fixed upon her with a cold, inquiring expression which set her pulses beating. Anger their noble, merciful friend-in-need still further than she already had been so unfortunate as to do by her unavoidable refusal to disclose the identity of her persecutor? She would not do that!

"I said nothing, Lady Ivordale," she replied, with an ingenuous gaze into her new friend's eyes; just as Lord St George suggested escorting the Marchioness to supper.

"No, Lord St George, you shall not take me in to supper for a very good reason: I do not want anything! You may not have noticed me—we old women are naturally uninteresting—but I do

not ever eat as late as this—by my doctor's orders. Here is my husband! Take Lady Beard to supper, Ivordale! And, my friend, you take Miss Dormer."

Although Lady Ivordale's voice was gently pitched and sweetly feminine, she spoke with the assurance of one who was accustomed to obedience—whose lightest wish was law. Beryl found herself following Lord Ivordale, who was escorting Lady Beard, her own hand resting on the arm of Lord St George. But just as they reached the bottom of the stairs she saw Davenant standing in the curtained doorway they must pass to reach the refreshment-room. Pass him defiantly? She dared not! Lord St George might, by some look or word of her enemy's, suspect his identity.

She halted—and her escort, halting also, gave a curious glance downward at her suddenly-pallid face.

"What is it?" he courteously, but distantly, inquired.

The courtesy, the chill composure, were almost terrible to her. She told herself she "could not bear it." Everyone else on the face of the earth was welcome to flout and ignore her—to be freezing, malevolent, threatening—she felt she could smile and be at peace were the whole world, indeed, at enmity with her. But for the slightest gulf to open between her and her one friend and benefactor—that she could not endure.

"Please, I do not want to go back to that

refreshment-room—I really want nothing but to speak to you!" she faltered. Her great, beautiful eyes sought his. And he? There was something in their expression which touched him to the quick—not for the first time.

He smiled. "You shall do exactly as you like," he indulgently said. "It seems to be the interval. The musicians are filing out of the gallery." He glanced up, then down. "And—I am pleased to see they are opening some of those windows at the top to let out a little of the overheated air—a first-rate move! Shall we find a corner—airy, but not draughty—for our little talk?"

She mutely assented—and with a devout hope that those gimlet eyes of Davenant's might not happen to glance in her direction, she accepted his arm, and crossed the fast-emptying ball-room. Near the other steps leading up to the daïs was a screened corner where some easy chairs were placed invitingly under a bank of big ferns and tall sub-tropical trees in green tubs.

"I think this is just the place for a quiet confabulation," he genially began, as they came up to the chairs. "Take this low basket chair, and now, tell me, what is it that you want to ask me? Your eyes asked me something just now—but I am not gifted with occult powers—I could not guess what it was!"

He spoke those last words almost caressingly,

as he slightly stretched his limbs, then subsided into a big chair at her side.

She looked almost nervously at his long, lithe form—at the dark head—the straight, sharply-cut, cameo-like profile.

"Oh!" she began. "It was only that—how shall I explain what I mean? I was afraid I had offended you—and that is the one thing I cannot bear!"

He turned towards her, and glanced a little anxiously at her lovely face, with the downcast lids—white veils to those luminous eyes—white veils with dark fringes. How graceful was her white neck—how suitable was that gleaming satin with the soft crimson knots.

"My dear child, you cannot possibly offend me," he began slowly, mentally gripping his emotions, and checking his unruly impulses. "When I undertook to see all of you through your trouble, I determined that nothing should deter me, interfere with my self-constituted guardianship! I look upon you as my eldest ward, Beryl! I should have interfered, have prevented you from going to Lady Beard, but that I knew you would do great good there—and how is wrong in a family to be atoned for but by right-doing? You understand me, I see, dear! No, I was not offended—but, honestly, I am more than sorry that you will not disclose the identity of the person who has dared to insult—outrage—you, with possibly false—and, I believe,

certainly false—news of St John! St John is my business—I have made him my business—and, my dear Beryl, I give you my word that if you cannot, or will not, tell me who this impudent threatener of you all is—it may harm, injure your unfortunate brother beyond repair."

She hesitated. His grave, warningly-uttered words influenced her in spite of herself. She believed that if she told the truth—if she betrayed Horace Davenant to Lord St George, mischief would, must indeed, come of it—still, there was a struggle within her. She was strongly inclined to tell her one and only friend all, everything. Then she recalled Davenant—his wicked eyes—his subtlety. She shuddered.

"I have pledged my word, or, at least, I have practically promised," she imploringly exclaimed with a beseeching glance. "Am I to break my word?"

"No, no!" he cordially returned. "Meanwhile it is, I assure you, absolutely essential that I should know who this unknown person is who professes to know where your brother is—I say 'professes' advisedly, for I do not believe he or she knows anything at all about him—that you must really, for your own sake as well as St John's, withdraw your promise! You can surely do that?"

"I can't—say," she faltered. Then she gave a ghastly glance askance at a slowly advancing figure, the figure of her *bête noire*. He was

coming, or rather lounging, across the room, glancing nonchalantly here and there—then, as if he suddenly perceived her, he turned and walked quickly up to them.

"Excuse me, my lord, but Miss Dormer is engaged to me for this next dance," he began almost obsequiously.

Lord St George rose. "Will you introduce me to this gentleman?" he courteously asked. Then, as Beryl obeyed with a feeling of desperation, he said, "You were pointed out to me by Sir Harry, Mr Davenant, as his 'right hand.'" He turned to Beryl. "We are leaving early," he said, glancing at his watch, "so perhaps I had better say good-night and *au revoir* now."

Beryl felt her hand clasped closely in her protector's, then he was gone. She was alone with the man who had insulted her—her bitter enemy. She turned upon him. Her eyes flashed.

"After this, I believe you capable of almost anything!" she vindictively said, in a low, but intensely acrid tone.

"You pay me the greatest possible compliment; you are afraid of me," he returned, as they strolled down the room. He was smiling. She glanced at him, and loathed that smile.

"I am not afraid of you, but of the harm you may do," she indignantly said. "I think you are mad! You profess to love me, and in the same breath you threaten ruin to me and mine, and

offer me the greatest insult man can offer woman!"

"I beg your pardon," he humbly said. "I confess I was wrong! But your beauty, your fascination would intoxicate any man into the temporary delirium when he loses his self-mastery. Beryl, I entreat you to forgive me! I was brought to my senses again directly you were out of my sight! You shall not have to reproach me again! You promised to give me and my hopes time, remember! You remember that, I hope?"

"Yes, I remember!" she admitted, telling herself that to temporise, and, above all, to preserve silence, was her only safe method of warfare against this subtle villain.

"I have no fear for the ultimate result, if you keep your word and wait, without allowing your feelings to overwhelm your judgment," he confidently said. "You will be my wife sooner or later, dear, I promise you that! But here come the supper-eaters flocking back. Let us take our places."

As she danced the ensuing square dance with her tormentor, Beryl made valiant efforts to suppress every hint or symptom of the intense horror and aversion she felt for him.

"I must have succeeded," she told herself, as she was driving homewards with Lady Beard, who drowsily subsided into a corner, and was fast asleep before they had covered the first half-

mile. Davenant had been fatuously, if not furtively, lover-like during the dance, and, when Lady Beard suggested leaving, had accompanied them to the landau, and parted from Beryl with a crushing squeeze of her hand and a meaning glance of his beady eyes. "He does not suspect that I would rather he did his worst, however bad that worst may be, than that he should ever take me in his arms and kiss me, as he did to-night—again!" she told herself, with a shudder of disgust.



CHAPTER XIX

BERYL summoned her courage and rallied her wits for the next encounter with Davenant—for she believed in his protestations as little as in himself.

But to her surprise and relief he ignored the climax of the ball night, and dropped back into his first attitude of amiable and sympathetic colleague. He sought no *tête-à-tête* conferences; he seemed more at Sir Harry's beck and call, more absorbed in his secretarial duties, than before.

He was evidently playing a waiting game; and, after much thought and self-questioning, she decided that it would be unwise to open hostilities by suggesting the withdrawal of her promise to keep his confidences secret, as Lord St George had urged her to do.

"If Lord St George had had the slightest idea who the creature who had threatened me was, he would have advised me to leave him severely alone—I am certain he would!" she told herself. Then the day of her departure for her visit to Stretfield Court arrived. Lady Beard, who

seemed quite elated by the Marchioness's kind interest in her young *protégée*, had superintended the packing of the trunks, choosing the frocks Beryl was to wear, and had insisted upon her being accompanied by Pearson, "not for Lady Ivordale or her guests, my dear, but for the servants, who will think nothing of you if you have no maid," she said. Pearson had left with the luggage when the Marchioness arrived in her barouche, and came rustling into the boudoir, her bright complexion and wreath of white curls admirably suited by an old-fashioned plum-coloured watered silk costume trimmed with ermine, an ermine and plum-coloured toque, and an ermine cape. After her cordial salutations, she glanced round at the assemblage of cats through her long-handled eyeglass.

"Dear me!" she pleasantly remarked. "I used to give my children-friends a picture-book with a story in verse which began 'In Cat-o-Land there lived a happy pair.' One might parody it here by 'In Cat-o-Land there lived a happy score!' Or are there more than a score? And which is my pet-to-be?"

There was a little bustle introducing the various feline beauties; then, when Beryl returned from putting on hat and jacket, there came the moment of Lady Beard's parting from another of "Patty's babies," as she called them. A satin-lined circular basket used on these occasions was brought out, and the tabby kitten with the quaint face and

bright, inquisitive eyes, was coaxed to settle herself on a soft cushion therein: Lady Beard gave an anxious, almost pathetic, gaze at her departing favourite, then the lid of the basket was shut down, the Marchioness was presented with a tin of the "pussy-cakes" Lady Beard had invented—"pure nourishment, flavoured with angelica, which my cats all like to distraction," their proprietress explained—and in a few minutes Beryl was driving away at the Marchioness's side behind the high-stepping horses and the powdered coachman and footman.

She felt somewhat as she imagined Cinderella must have felt after her remarkable interview with her fairy godmother and its results; still, Lady Ivordale was so essentially human and natural, such a real, unaffected woman in spite of her rank, wealth, and social importance, that before they were half way through their long, if picturesque, carriage journey, Beryl had forgotten the storm and stress of her life under the same roof as her enemy Horace Davenant, and was mentally rejoicing in the coming reunion with Lord St George.

Only towards the close of their long drive did Lady Ivordale allude to the surprise she had promised her young guest on her arrival.

"My dear, prepare yourself to be considerably astonished," she half-laughingly said, as, after driving at some speed through a fine, old, well-timbered park, they were nearing the beautiful

white stone Italian-built court, with its marble terraces and statues contrasting with the smooth green lawns whose cunningly-devised ribbon beds were beginning to flourish in response to the wooing of a warm spring sun. "I will not only say astonished, but a little mystified! However, I do not fancy you will be mystified long; you are by far too clever not to guess the situation!"

After such an enigmatical speech Beryl ascended the flight of steps leading to the main entrance with some misgiving, and as she entered a vast hall with a domed ceiling and some fine old statues lending it a somewhat cold and pompous appearance, she glanced eagerly, and even anxiously, around.

"Tea is ready in my boudoir, dear; follow me, will you?" asked Lady Ivordale, divesting herself of her ermine cape, and handing it to a man-servant, who bowed, and went off evidently knowing what was to be done with it.

Beryl followed her new friend along a wide, splendidly-furnished corridor. On one side were pictures, cabinets of rare curios and unique specimens of china; on the other were long windows overlooking the famous Italian gardens of straight walks, rich flower-beds, marble temples containing statues, marble fountains sending up graceful jets of gleaming water. Then she started. She heard a familiar laugh, a pretty, soprano, affected laugh. She stopped short as the Marchioness paused before a door, and

exclaimed, "I see you know! But, my dear, pray don't look so tragic! Don't be a death's head at the feast!"

As she spoke, in a kindly, bantering tone, she opened the door and preceded Beryl into a large, exquisitely-arranged boudoir. Its walls were of pale, fluted pink satin, with wreaths of wildrose painted on the surrounding white. The carpet was white, scattered with the same enticing blossom, which figured on the Sheraton furniture and bordered the white satin hangings. The room, with its elaborate and luxurious decoration, took Beryl aback. But when she saw, as centre of a group of ladies of various ages who surrounded a low tea-table laden with old silver and china, her sister, Cynthia — Cynthia, her fair hair elaborately dressed, attired in a pale blue silk tea-gown smothered in lace which had been one of her trousseau dresses—Cynthia, pink-cheeked, bright-eyed, and smiling, she felt as if she must be dreaming.

"Why, Beryl! You look quite frightened," cried the childish voice, then Cynthia flung herself back on the satin cushions of her low chair and burst into a peal of laughter.

Cynthia's silvery laughter always had succeeded in coaxing similar hilarity in others. This time most of the ladies laughed, including Lady Ivordale. But Beryl did not even smile. She turned to Lady Ivordale.

"I could not have had a greater surprise than

to find my sister here," she gravely, deferentially said.

"Didn't I tell you Beryl was a real old maid, Lady Curtis?" cried Cynthia, to the middle-aged lady next her, rising, and gliding out of the circle to take her sister's cold hand and kiss her cheek. "She must always know the ins and outs of everything, or she looks like that—as if the world was coming to an end! I told Lord St George he had better tell her I was here, didn't I, Lady Ivordale? I said, 'you don't know Beryl, but I do.'"

"Well, my dear, I am sure your sister is immensely pleased to see you here, but you must expect her to be a little startled, not having the very faintest suspicion that you were the promised surprise," said Lady Ivordale. "Dear Margie, find Miss Dormer a chair. Cynthia, give your sister some tea. Is it fresh? If not, ring the bell, will you, my dear?"

If Beryl had been utterly taken aback by finding Cynthia established at Stretfield Court, she was still more astounded to find her sister unmistakably adopted as a privileged being—a child of the house. She felt dumbly blank. Fortunately for her, her gravity and silence escaped notice, for Lady Ivordale's guests were busied taking tea and inspecting the kitten—who seemed quite at home among her admirers, and caused fresh peals of laughter by her quaint little ways.

"Your room is next to Cynthia's, dear—in the



ladies' wing, as we call it," said the Marchioness caressingly to Beryl as the party broke up, some to walk before dressing time, others to write letters, the girl Lady Ivordale called "Margie," who seemed quite Cynthia's chum, to practise billiards. "You will like to have a talk together, I am sure. The men will hardly be back before dressing time; they have gone to one of the 'finals,' as they call these football matches, and they have miles to drive. What, Cynthia? Lord St George asked you for a game of chess at six o'clock? He could not have understood how far from here Gumleigh is."

Cynthia pouted and smiled, gave a peculiar little toss of her head which was a coquettish trick quite new to Beryl, then linking her arm in her elder sister's with a great display of affection, conducted her along the corridor to an opposite wing of the house, which seemed to Beryl quite a museum of art treasures. Beautiful pictures, some of them familiar to her by their published engravings; statues, statuettes, and busts—china and bronze, cloisonné and beaten metals met her eyes everywhere, and made her wonder how the mistress of such a magnificent mansion could have troubled herself to invite two girls such as herself and Cynthia. "She almost told me it was Lord St George she did it for," she thought, as Cynthia ran in front, and, impatiently opening a door, ushered her into a large, lofty bed-chamber, whose prevailing tints were green and white.

"And now, you dear old-maidish-looking frump, what do you mean by looking glum, and just as if we all were injuring you?" cried the lively girl, flinging herself on the sofa at the foot of the dainty bed, tempting with its Honiton lace over pink satin bedspread and the embroidered pillows. "It won't do here, Beryl, to look as if you were out for the day from the workhouse, and grudged your betters their comforts! That is really what you look like. If you don't try to seem pleased, people will think you are jealous of me—that you think you ought to be the great lady instead of me."

Beryl stared at Cynthia aghast. Was the child mad? Had the grandeur of her surroundings and these great people's kindness, coming so soon after the trouble of St John and the ill-behaviour of the Lambtons, father and son, turned her brain? She sank into a chair.

"Dear Cynthia! What do you, can you, mean?" she helplessly asked.

Cynthia gave a triumphant little laugh.

"That I was right and you were wrong about the cause of Lord St George's kindness to us," she proudly said. "I do not blame you for not being able to see farther than your nose, although I cannot say it is nice of you to be so jealous of me that you think it an impossibility for a man to fall so much in love with me that he has practically saddled himself with my family as well!"

The blood seemed to rush madly back to



Beryl's heart. Her eyes were dazzled, her lips felt cold and stiff.

"My dear child, pray speak plainly," she managed to say, although her voice sounded strange and far-away to her. "I was never good at guessing conundrums!"

"You choose to consider what is evident to everyone a 'conundrum,' as you call it," said Cynthia, moodily noting her sister's pallor, which she attributed to envy. "I am certain, although you have chosen to blind yourself to the fact for some reason or another best known to yourself, that you know as well as I do that Lord St George shielded St John, and has made enormous sacrifices for us, because from the first moment he saw me, he meant to marry me!"

Beryl gazed at her sister in a sort of incredulous stupor. "She is mad, raving mad," she told herself over and over again, almost deliriously. Then a horrible misgiving seemed to pierce her to the quick. In a flash she remembered speeches of St George's—allusions, half-uttered, half-suppressed, which had seemed enigmatical to a certain extent yet had awakened a hopeful feeling, a trust in him, why or wherefore she could not have told.

"You mean Lord St George has asked you to be his wife?" she abruptly asked. The words seemed to sting her as she uttered them. Somehow, it still seemed treason to him to take Cynthia's assertions seriously.

"I am not at liberty to say what has passed between us, because for the present there will be no definite engagement," said Cynthia, leaning back luxuriously on the satin sofa-cushions, and speaking with a certain lazy satisfaction. "He explained that for the present nothing of the kind can be made public. St John must turn up and his affairs be properly settled before I can become the Countess of St George."

Beryl started. "Cynthia! as I live you are mistaken," she hoarsely said. "You are in a fool's paradise! You have misunderstood Lord St George utterly, terribly! I am absolutely certain you have!"

Cynthia coloured, and gave an angry laugh. "I believe you are in love with the man yourself!" she cried; "or with his title and money. Well, I should be enraged, disgusted with you, only if you have been buoying yourself up with the foolish notion that he has done everything for your sake, it is a nasty come-down! Myself, I think if it had happened to me to imagine a man was in love with me when he was going to marry my sister, I should feel so small and ashamed that I should hide my head for the remainder of my days!"

For a few moments Beryl leant back in her chair and closed her eyes. She felt, with the solemn feeling which comes to all at such supreme moments of life, that there was but one thing to be done: to endure, patiently, in silence. Mean-

while, she remembered a picture she had seen of a girl, in feature and form not unlike herself, clinging, with the grasp of those who fight death by drowning, to a rude stone cross set upon the rocks, while the angry waves beat about her feet.

"I must cling to my cross," she told herself. Then she rose, and though her limbs felt stiff and she was visibly trembling, she went to her sister and sat down by her.

"Cynthia! You are cruel, but I do not reproach you," she began. "Our parents are dead—I am their substitute—a poor, miserable one—but still the only one to you and Pearl. I know it would have been a joy to them to see you the wife of a real good man like Lord St George. So I am pleased and thankful—although, somehow, you two are so absolutely different that you will have to make great mutual concessions if you mean to get on together."

Cynthia, easily mollified so long as her thirst for admiration and importance met with incense, flung her arms about Beryl's neck and kissed her cheek.

"Good old Beryl! Always croaking! But I am thankful for small mercies; I ought to be, indeed, with such good luck as mine. Why, I shall be able to turn St George round my little finger; anyone can see that. Why do you make that grimace? You don't believe it? You never did appreciate me as the men do, Beryl. But you

will when I pay for Pearl at a finishing-school and find a husband for you—for although you look and behave like an old maid you aren't one, and if St George and I together can't get you well married, I shall be very much astonished!"

"Then you will be astonished," said Beryl, as composedly as she could speak. "But, that is the first dressing-bell, surely! No? Anyhow, I I should like to go to my room. Lady Beard sent her maid, you know, and I ought to speak to her about my things."

The bride-elect condescendingly escorted her sister to her room, which was the next apartment to her own, and with equal affability made some pleasant remarks to Pearson, who seemed to Beryl to bridle and simper a good deal.

"That was my younger sister, Pearson," she somewhat curtly said, as Cynthia floated out and back to her room, after informing them that one of the Marchioness's maids had been told off to be at her beck and call, one who was a really superb hairdresser.

"So I understand, m'm, and a very beautiful young lady she is; fit to be a princess, let alone a duchess," said Pearson, meaningly. Evidently the coming event of Cynthia's conquest of a hitherto invulnerable peer had cast its shadow before as far as the housekeeper's room was concerned. But Beryl resolutely refrained from further talk with Lady Beard's confidential maid



She asked that she might dress at once, so that Pearson would be free to "look about the place," and Pearson acquiescing—she had shrewdly guessed that there was "plenty going on to pass a body's time" in the exalted household — Beryl presently found herself alone.

Alone! At first the sensation had a certain awfulness about it. As she sank cowering, gasping, into a low chair, and stared wildly about her as if scared by the unfamiliar surroundings, the stricken girl told herself that never had she been so completely desolate in the world before—and that her utter solitude, her isolation, would last until she yielded up her final breath.

She did not attempt to deceive herself, to palter with facts. If she had never realised that Lord St George was the one and only hero of her life, that she loved him with brain, mind, as well as heart—loved him as she had never yet loved human creature, and would never love human creature again, she realised it now — realised it with such intense despair, such burning shame, that it seemed to her that it was more than mere emotion that she felt. It was as if her very soul were plunged in a fire of bitterness and horror—bitterness, because she loved a man who only liked her, who had only been goodness, nobility itself to her, because he loved her sister; horror at herself because she had allowed herself to love him.

"I could not help loving him!" she piteously repeated to herself, as her pride soared up like some evil genius and lashed her with cruel reproaches. "And I shall love him till I die—love him, as one of the highest beings alive, as a brother given me by heaven instead of poor, wretched St John!"

But it was a stormy hour—the hour immediately succeeding that revelation of Cynthia's; and the very hardest to fight through of Beryl's young life. Comforting thoughts came to her, and seemed to fan her suffering soul like angel's wings; memories of holy words in the Sacred Book anent love. It was never forbidden to love, she told herself. It had been told to humanity that if they did not love the brethren they had seen, they could not love the Creator they had not seen. Still, no comfort or consolation was more than a slight alleviation of the torture of tearing herself free from one who had, unknown to herself, become her idol.

But patient suffering brings strength. And when Beryl descended to the drawing-room arm-in-arm with the gay, prattling, triumphant Cynthia, nothing but a slight pallor and droop of her lovely lips would have suggested the mental and moral crisis she had been through.



CHAPTER XX

STILL, that progress downstairs, along the beautiful corridors where every artistic object seemed to mock her in her desolation of spirit, was, Beryl thought, with a faint smile at her own folly, just a little like the march of a culprit to punishment. She would willingly have lingered on any pretence, for the dreaded moment was at hand—the moment when she would face Lord St George under the new conditions.

Dreaded moment—because she feared with uttermost fear to betray herself. If she did not seem exactly the same Beryl, he might—horror of horrors!—suspect her degradation, suspect that she had cared for him more than for a mere friend and benefactor. And if he ever knew, or even dreamt of such a thing, Beryl felt that life would become unbearable to her.

"I must seem just as usual," she desperately told herself, as Cynthia opened the drawing-room door, and she saw one of the exquisite rooms people came far and near, during the Marquis and Marchioness's absence, to see—for Stretfield Court was one of the "Stately Homes" of England,

and a place for tourists and holiday-makers to visit. This was the blue drawing-room: an oblong chamber with delicately-painted panels let into the blue-and-white satin walls, and hung with pale blue and lace, while the same azure hue was predominant in the white and gilded Sheraton chairs and settees which Lady Ivordale's house-party, augmented by guests from neighbouring country seats, were occupying. As Beryl entered she vaguely saw the Watteau-like interior, and felt thankful that the party was a large one. Then, just as she was feeling that the mingled perfumes of the hot-house flowers were making her slightly faint, the courtly welcome of Lord Ivordale, who came up, recalled her to herself.

"I am very glad indeed to see you here, Miss Dormer," he cordially began. Then he spoke pleasantly of the Hunt Ball and of Sir Harry and Lady Beard, ending by calling his son, Lord Wilmesley, and introducing him to her.

It seemed that Lord Wilmesley, a fair, slim likeness of his handsome mother, had been told off to take Beryl to dinner; and with the family urbanity he drew a chair near hers, and began telling her who everyone was, beginning with his young wife, a plump pretty woman, who was laughing and talking on a settee to a melancholy-looking black-bearded man, as if nothing had as yet come her way but the cakes and ale of mundane existence. But Beryl feigned the interest she could not feel, for, as soon as she was certain that

Lord St George was not one of the assembled company, she began watching for him. Every time the door opened her heart gave a leap, and she had the greatest difficulty not to turn her head to see who entered, for she was seated with her back to the door. Happily, Lord Wilmesley chattered on, seemingly satisfied with an occasional smile or monosyllable from the "pale, tragic-looking girl," as he mentally dubbed her, thinking that she was nervous and shy, and liking her all the better for it. "Handsomer than her sister, too, by Jove, even in that black rag," he told himself in disdain of her cherished Brussels net evening frock.

The groom of the chambers had announced dinner before Lord St George came in, looking round. Beryl felt he had not seen her. But he spoke a word to his hostess, then went straight to Cynthia. Beryl hardly knew how she made the brief passage on Lord Wilmesley's arm to the great dining-hall. She felt thankful to find herself seated safely at the table, and still more thankful to see that her opposite neighbours did not include Lord St George and Cynthia, who were seated the same side as herself, nearer to Lord Ivordale.

At any other time she would have felt an artistic pleasure in making one of so brilliant a living picture. The dining-hall of Stretfield Court was sufficiently beautiful in itself, with its Grinling Gibbons carvings and grand old ceiling, with its long table spread with the gold plate

possessed by the Ivordales for some centuries. Then there were the accessories of liveried, powdered-headed servitors, of many exquisitely-arranged flowers, while the ear was charmed by the subdued dulcet music of a trio—harp, flute, and violin—engaged by the Marquis for the season when he hunted and shot at Stretfield—which was concealed by a high screen in one corner, and therefore had a superadded charm of mystery. Then the daintily-served menu was the perfection of catering. Beryl puzzled her lordly escort by the supreme indifference with which she toyed with her food, until the idea suddenly flashed upon him that she might be in love, and he could hardly help bursting into a laugh. To fret or to be troubled because of a *penchant* for another human being seemed to the young Earl such madness that he made haste to laugh lest he might weep. "Let us eat, drink, and be merry" was the philosophy of both himself and the plump partner of his joys.

The meal seemed interminable to Beryl, the courses innumerable—especially after she had arrived at a certain determination which startled her so much by its boldness, and, perhaps, slightly questionable advisability, that she was in a fever of impatience to test it by putting it into practice as speedily as possible.

This was to speak boldly to St George; to ask him if Cynthia were right or not in her belief that he intended to marry her. She still doubted

—her heart and soul doubted—the astounding fact that such a man should choose such a woman to be his Countess—his wife.

The longer she pondered, the more resolved she became to carry out her idea. The very determination revived her. After all, what harm could such a question do?

"I stand *in loco parentis* in regard to Cynthia and Pearl," she told herself. "I have as much right to inquire into their affairs as if I were their sole surviving parent." As the dinner drew to an end her mind was made up.

"If only I can talk the thing over with him as coolly as I did St John's misfortunes and ill-doings!" she thought with a sigh, as the whole company left the table—some adjourning to the billiard-room, the others, led by the Marchioness, to the oak drawing-room, a fine old-fashioned apartment, whose panelled walls hung with portraits, and heavy carved ceiling, together with the strangely shaped old furniture, suggested a step back a couple of centuries.

It was not fashionable at Stretfield Court for the men to linger over their wine and cigars after the ladies rose to leave the dinner-table. So among the bright company that sat about in the fine old oak chamber, sipping the coffee or liqueurs which men-servants were serving on massive silver-gilt trays, were the greater number of the men Beryl had seen in the drawing-room or in the dining-hall. Just as she noted, with a thrill of pain, that

neither Cynthia nor Lord St George were present, the two came in together.

Cynthia was wearing a charming costume of Pompadour silk, somewhat fantastically made. As she entered and stood complacently glancing about her, gracefully waving a large feather-fan, Lord Wilmesley crossed from the other side of the room, and began talking both to her and to Lord St George. For a few minutes Beryl watched them, fascinated. What airs and graces Cynthia had suddenly acquired! She tilted her pretty well-dressed head, and smiled coquettishly upon Lord Ivordale's heir. Then at some remark of his she laughed and tapped him on his arm with her closed fan. Surely Lord St George would frown at such a frivolous, silly display of coquetry? No; he was gazing at them both almost stupidly. Then he suddenly turned and left them. Surely, surely, he was not coming to her? Beryl asked herself, in secret dread of their next interview, shrinking against the carved back of her chair.

He was. As he neared her, a lady detained him, the one who had been most charmed with the kitten at tea-time. He listened to what she had to say with his usual courtesy, then he replied, and came straight up to Beryl.

"At last!" he exclaimed, seating himself on the chair at her side. "I thought I was to escort you to dinner, but the Fates willed otherwise! I meant to be back to welcome you, but mis-

calculated the drive. We went to a football match ever so far away—I was on tenterhooks all the time. I had promised your sister a game of chess. What? She told you?"

"Yes," said Beryl, striving to speak nonchalantly. "What is Cynthia going to do now?"

Cynthia had laid aside her fan, and was posturing, daintily holding her skirt and dancing with mincing steps. Then Lord Wilmesley led her to an empty space on the polished floor, and seemed giving orders to the footmen, who at once stooped and carried off some of the skins scattered about on the parquetry.

He laughed. "She didn't tell you? She was quite excited about it," he indulgently replied, with a deprecating glance towards the couple, who were standing together as if arguing, while the footmen made space for them by moving away small tables, settees, stools, any object occupying the centre of the chamber. "At the dance to-morrow the minuet is to be revived; at all events, two other couples have engaged to dance it as well as Wilmesley and Cynthia. There was a rehearsal last night; they are going to dance it now. Do you want to see it? I am longing to take you round the picture gallery. Cannot you wait till to-morrow to see those two posturing and curtseying?"

"Yes," she replied. He had spoken slightingly of the dance. As she rose and accompanied

him from the room into a long, narrow chamber crowded with oil-paintings and lit with softened electric light—the house was lighted by the newest inventions except where good taste demanded the older fashions—Beryl told herself that probably he could not look on at his love dancing with another man without a jealous qualm.

The thought was bitter, and as Lord St George began to act the showman, and to point out the *chefs-d'œuvre* of Lord Ivordale's gallery, she forgot to assume the mask, to appear interested. Presently he stopped short and faced her.

"Is it that you do not care for these old masters, or that you would rather not be here—with me?" he abruptly asked.

"Neither!" she cried, boldly. "But my thoughts are naturally preoccupied, my lord, for Cynthia has told me—all!"

Her heart beat stormily, but she gazed bravely up into his face, into those strange eyes of his, which in the light looked sea-green, in the dark a curious purple.

"I do not understand," he began slowly, evidently astonished. "I am absolutely certain I have not betrayed one definite thing to Cynthia!"

"You have said quite enough to make her indulge in a pretty shrewd guess!" she hardily said, turning away. She could not bear to gaze at Cynthia's lover for long.

"I have not said one decisive word to your sister," he began, with a certain doggedness. "If she has imagined the truth it must have been simple conjecture! Why, you—you were the very first person to whom I would suggest my hopes! You wronged me when you thought I would do anything else! Beryl, you know, or rather you suspect, and you are cold — indifferent? Do you mean to say that you—you will blight my whole life by saying 'No'?"

Her limbs trembled beneath her. The room seemed to sway, to reel. Then the soft, enticing, delicious murmur of a minuet played by the trio of musicians stole upon the silence. She imagined Cynthia, in the pride of her youth and loveliness, dancing, attracting the admiring gaze of her hosts and their guests. She turned bitterly to Lord St George.

"If my parents had lived they would have rejoiced, have thought themselves only too fortunate, for you to be their son-in-law!" she exclaimed. Then she seated herself giddily upon the nearest chair, and strove for calmness. Discussion anent St George's marriage was evidently inevitable. She could not fence or avoid it.

For a few moments there was a dead silence. Beryl stared miserably in the corner, her head averted from Cynthia's lover—that was all he seemed to her then—and he was gazing at her

with a peculiar expression, half wrathful, half despairing. Then he spoke, abruptly, hoarsely.

"I have been a madman," he said. "I thought you cared for me!" Something in his tone, a deep emotion, a longing, a disappointment, brought the blood rushing to her cheeks. If he loved Cynthia passionately, it seemed that he still had room in his heart for her, his sister-to-be! She remembered Lady Ivordale's suggestion, which had annoyed her at the time, that he was "in love with the whole family."

"If I did not care for you, my lord, I should be a monster of ingratitude," she began, warmly. "But this idea has been such a surprise! I hardly know how I feel about it, except that I cannot think that Cynthia will be able quite to understand you as she ought!"

"Good Heavens, what does that matter? What has Cynthia to do with it?" he cried, drawing a chair near her, seating himself, and peremptorily possessing himself of her cold hand. "You think too much of Cynthia, dear! She is a charming butterfly, and I encouraged her being invited here, because, if she sees a little society, she will be less trouble to you in the future. I wish she would not flirt with Wilmesley, though. Beryl, darling, what is it?"

He spoke in alarm, for she had paled to lividity, her eyes gazed at him with an expression of ghastly horror.

"You—do not mean—to marry—Cynthia?" she faltered.

His hand loosened. "Good Heavens, what are you talking about?" he stammered, pushing back his chair, and staring at her. "I—marry—Cynthia? Why, I would rather be hanged, drawn, and quartered. That I would!"

"Then—then—what do you mean?" she gasped.

"I mean what I have always meant. I loved you when I first saw you on Roland's arm, although I did not dream it, I would rather have gone a thousand miles away than steal my brother's love from him," he began hoarsely. He was deadly pale, as he leant back in his chair with folded arms, gazing at her with an unfathomable expression. "When I knew—discovered—the fact—I was mad for a time—I had hard work not to solve the awful problem by putting a bullet through my head, and leaving Roland the title and land and money as well as you for his wife! But you did not care for him, I soon saw that, and there were wild moments when I felt in ecstasy that my love had so far influenced you that you liked me—liked and trusted me. When you rejected Roland, and it enraged instead of crushed him—when I knew, too, that he had been flirting desperately with a girl in our set who really loves him, I made up my mind to ask you if you would be mine, my wife. Beryl—can you, will you?"

She shivered as if with ague. After the hideous

mental suffering of the afternoon the revulsion of feeling was too great, then Cynthia—Cynthia! As she remembered Cynthia, all around her seemed to reel.

"Cynthia!" she miserably cried. "How can I say anything when Cynthia believes you love her? When she must have hinted, if not actually told everyone, that she was to be your wife!"

He sprang up, muttering something under his breath.

"Neither you nor I are to be sacrificed to Cynthia or to anyone, do you understand?" he began, and his eyes gleamed dangerously. "You know nothing of the world, of the folly, vanity, selfishness, Beryl! You will not let poor Cynthia's silly vanity, absurd conceit, come between us? Oh, darling, you cannot say you do not love me. You, who are truth itself, dare not deny it."

Stooping, he took her in his arms, and lifted her up so that he gazed down into her eyes. There was no roughness or want of reverence in his thus taking her to him. But as she trembled and palpitated in his embrace, she felt his strong will, his iron, truthful nature, and succumbed.

"I say—nothing," she murmured. Her eyes fell before his. A burning blush suffused her pale features.

"My dearest, my second self, my Beryl, I have hated myself, I have felt my identity a burden, I have never cared for my *ego*, in fact, there have been times when to live on was so unbearable an

infliction, that I dared not be alone, lest I should seek death, and if—if you could not have cared for me, I know, I feel sure, that Roland would soon have come to his inheritance."

His mournful, beseeching tones roused her sleeping passion, that love for him which seemed to her to have grown about her whole mental, moral and physical being like the ivy about one of the old oaks in the copse "at home." Suddenly, she laid both hands on his breast, and gazed up into his face.

"You are my king, and I am your beggar maiden," she said, slowly, passionately. "Your will is my law. You have but to speak—I obey!"

He bent and kissed her, as he might have kissed her if one or the other were dying. To him there was an intense solemnity in pledging himself to live for another, when hitherto life had seemed so valueless. It meant the consecration of himself to new, and, until now, dreaded duties.

For awhile they sat, their hands clasped, their eyes, gazing love, confidence, hope into each others. After a request of his, gently made, that she would not ask him yet about her brother—she would doubtless hear better news of St John than she had dared to hope for later on—he spoke of their marriage. He wished it to take place soon.

"Why wait?" he almost impatiently inquired. "You are too wise to want a lot of fine clothes,

and a fuss. We don't want to help to sell the society papers, or to be fresh food for tabby tea-table talk. What we ought to do is to be married quietly—in some old city church, for instance, like people do in novels, one of those neglected, if grand, old buildings which smell of mould, and no one cares for or thinks anything of—and then leave for Italy. Spring in Italy, with you as my companion? Why, it will be heaven on earth!"

Now that she had yielded, now that his foot was metaphorically on his adored one's neck, the Earl waxed as masterful as he was newly impetuous.

"Cynthia, indeed! Let her pride have a fall—it will do her good to have a lesson that will make her smart," he half-contemptuously retorted, when Beryl lamented the blow her sister would receive. "She cares as little for me as for one of those family portraits opposite. She is pretty, bewitching, fascinating if you please, but if she dreamt it possible for any man, I don't care whom, to think of her as his future wife when they knew you—why, she deserves to be taught her place in the world, to find her level."

Beryl's pleading that for the present at least her engagement should remain a cherished secret between them, or, at all events, that it should not be made public until she left Stretfield, was unsuccessful.

"People of your sort are always injuring them-

selves, and I intend to take your life and its management into my own hands now," he somewhat peremptorily said. "I shall tell everyone of my happiness as soon as I can, the sooner the better. If Cynthia goes into hysterics, or faints, I can't help it. But don't you be afraid, my love. That young lady's self-esteem will come to the rescue. She won't give herself away before Wilmesley; she has been flirting unconscionably with him, by the way, only he is so stolid that I really believe he doesn't know it! Then, there are a good many eligibles here to-night, and there will be more to-morrow."

He also absolutely vetoed Beryl's return to Lady Beard's under any circumstances whatever; and as she dared not give her principal reason for wishing at least to make a farewell stay at Ilkfield Grange—which was conciliation of St John's avowed enemy and her avowed admirer, Horace Davenant—she made no impression upon him with her almost beseeching suggestions.

"Meanwhile I hate saying 'No' to you," he said, after some discussion, as he saw a sad wistfulness in her sweet eyes which he had promised himself should be banished thence for ever as soon as possible. "So I will go over to Deepdale to-morrow and consult your uncle. Perhaps he would wish our marriage to take place there. We shall see!"

After some difficulty he consented not to announce their engagement until his return from

Deepdale in good time for the dance. Beryl's plea was that she wished to prepare Cynthia for her disappointment.

"You will have to steel yourself a little more, darling, unless you mean to be hopelessly wretched through life," he tenderly said, as he strolled slowly by her side to the oak drawing-room. "You say I am not one to talk, after St John's miserable affair? That is a case apart. I helped St John for your sake alone. Oh, dearest! will you ever learn, know, what you have been, what you are—to me?"



CHAPTER XXI

WHEN Beryl was locked into her room that night she felt slightly delirious with joy. Perhaps it was as well for her that her happiness was marred by two memories—firstly, the remembrance that Cynthia actually believed herself St George's bride-elect, and that the task of disabusing her of her erroneous idea lay immediately before her.

"If only she does not love him, it will not be so dreadful," she thought. Then she asked herself if Cynthia had ever really loved anyone, and the conviction that her sister's shallow nature was actually incapable of deep emotion, consoled her.

Her second inward misgiving—that when Horace Davenant learnt the truth he would fulfil his threat, and injure St John and herself and her sisters—was not so easily disposed of. Still, when Davenant knew that she was to be Lord St George's wife, and that the Earl was St John's protector, he would hardly, she thought, anger Sir Harry and Lady Beard by offending her or her husband-to-be.

"He had no idea when he threatened me that St George cared for me—so perhaps that will alter matters," she mused. In any case it was not Davenant who was her immediate task—but Cynthia.

When Cynthia, charming in a pretty morning *confection*, fluttered in to breakfast, and heard that Lord St George had started to spend the day away somewhere, she seemed in nowise discomfited, but entered upon a brisk flirtation with her *vis-à-vis* at the table, a callow, fair-haired, blushing young man, who was, however, the son and heir of a wealthy baronet, whose principal country estate was in the adjacent county, a certain Sir Walter Henshaw.

But, breakfast over, she haled her sister into the shrubbery—and in an unfrequented spot, flew into a passion and accused her of "undermining her engagement."

"I know St George so well; he is one of the most jealous men alive. I brought him to the point by flirting with that silly idiot, Wilmesley," she angrily cried. "I am certain he has been cross-questioning you about that hateful Jack Lambton, and that you have led him to imagine I cared for the horrid brute! You are a regular dog-in-the-manger, Beryl! You don't want the man yourself, but you grudge him to me! Why do I say that? He never came near me after he had been talking to you last night, he never even said good-night! And now he has started off for

the day. I wish you had been anywhere else, you spoilsport, before you came here to ruin my prospects!"

Then she indulged in an outburst of hysterical tears—suddenly dried by the sight of the callow youth wandering aimlessly about the gardens, seemingly watching or hoping for something or somebody.

"There is that Willie Henshaw waiting about to waylay me," she conceitedly said, dabbing her eyes viciously with a flimsy little handkerchief. "He is considered an immense *parti*. Lady Ivordale talked to me about him before she began to suspect about St George. I have only to encourage him for him, to make me an offer!"

"Then, Cynthia, do it!" exclaimed Beryl, warmly, laying her hand on her sister's arm. "Oh, my dear! I don't want to wound you, but if you really want to be married, and well married, take the young man! I give you my word that Lord St George has not the remotest idea of making you his wife, as you thought!"

Cynthia shook off Beryl's hand, and, shrinking back, gave her an angry stare.

"You—asked him!" she cried wrathfully, accusingly.

"I did," said Beryl, firmly—telling herself she must "go through with it" now—"and he said the most emphatic 'No' a man could say!"

Cynthia laughed, and glanced so bitterly, so

vindictively at her sister that Beryl's heart seemed to contract with pain.

"I daresay he did," she scornfully said. "When people ask questions about other people's business they are apt to receive short answers that simply mean refusals to reply. However, I quite understand now why St George is keeping out of your way. He does not mean to be called to account by you or anyone else. Don't be afraid! I will make it all right with him at the dance to-night."

She almost rushed away, and presently Beryl, leaning against the trunk of a tall pine and mournfully wondering at her sister's density and self-opinionatedness, saw her sauntering gracefully along one of the garden walks, the infatuated young man at her side.

The day seemed unusually long and curiously dreary. In her peculiar position, the plighted bride of the Earl of St George, and only a few hours distant from the publishing of the fact to all and sundry, she felt that for many reasons solitude was best. So she declined to make one of a driving excursion, and spent the long hours trying to read and work in her own room, or wandering about the beautiful grounds endeavouring to realise her future.

This she found it beyond her powers to do. Do what she might, she could not think of herself as the wife of the man whom she had worshipped, revered, and involuntarily adored

almost from the moment they first met—the Countess of St George, lifted far above all her troubles and anxieties, and proof against evil tongues—for her future husband knew the worst there was to know anent her family history, and was taking her misfortunes to himself as her only dowry.

"Only that he saddled himself with my misfortunes before he saddled himself with me," she told herself, with a laugh which was half a sob.

She was seated on a garden bench under a chestnut tree which was just putting forth its half-shut green fans. Through a mist—the moisture which had gathered in her eyes with that sob of mingled emotion—she gazed at the rich, soft turf before her. It was the end of the flower garden, and she was quite out of sight of the house in this secluded spot where she had chosen to rest. The gardeners had nothing to do there that afternoon—the lawn had been mown that morning and there were no borders or flower-beds to claim their attention—so when she saw someone coming quickly along the opposite path, she stared uneasily. Then, as she dashed the tears from her eyes, her heart gave a sudden, wild leap.

It was Lord St George. He evidently detected her in her hiding-place at once. As he came near, he waved his hand. She rose, involuntarily, wondering at his elasticity of step, at

the triumphant expression of his long, olive face, at the light in his eyes. As he neared her he tossed off his cap—then, she was in his arms, his kisses rained upon her brow, hair, lips.

"Don't you feel that you are really mine, now?" he asked, seating himself and drawing her down by his side, his arm fondly about her waist.

"I felt that yesterday," she said. "Only I cannot believe it somehow."

"Poor darling! You have not had many experiences to encourage you to believe in life," he fondly returned, gazing encouragingly into her sweet, wistful eyes. "But don't be afraid! Your night has passed, your day is to come. You are really mine, Beryl, now, for your uncle has given you to me, and he is your nearest relative—he ought by rights to have been your legal guardian. He will have us married there, and soon. You must not mind that, love, for many reasons. Until we are married I cannot take active steps to rescue and restore St John to his proper position. I intend to do this. Do you hear, love? You will go home to-morrow, and do as they advise? Your aunt is a dear good soul, and if you had seen her shake my hand and say: 'Oh, my poor, dear Beryl! How happy you have made me'—you would believe in me a little more!"

She turned suddenly, and raised her eyes to his. "That is impossible," she exclaimed, so

fervently that, if he had been diffident before on the subject of her love, he doubted no longer—he knew.

There was so much to discuss, in view of this projected "wedding in haste," as Beryl termed it, that for the moment she forgot all else. Lord St George had evidently settled most things with her uncle. The plans which only awaited her consent to be embarked upon were these: The following day she would proceed to Deepdale escorted by the Earl, who would then continue his journey to London to procure a special license and to give orders to his lawyers there in regard to settlements. In a few days Mr Dormer would perform the sacred ceremony with as little pomp and circumstance as possible in his pretty old church. Then the bridal couple would leave for France, *en route* for Italy. The date of their return, St George somewhat meaningly added, depended upon the St John trouble. "We will only face the world, my love, when it is out of the power of scandalous tongues to sting us," he said, with grave determination. "You shall not be stung by human serpents, I have made up my mind on that subject."

There was great peace in Beryl's soul, intense joy in her heart, as she leant against—clung to—her beloved under the chestnut tree. Her extraordinary, unexpected happiness softened her towards humanity in general, and each unit in particular. She felt remorseful for every harsh

thought and hard word of her life. She even thought kindly of her enemy, Horace Davenant, and when the remembrance of Cynthia and the bitter disillusionment in store for her flashed across her mind she gave such a plaintive little groan that St George started, fearing she was hurt.

"Oh! You are troubled about Cynthia!" he slightingly remarked. He only smiled with a certain amount of derision when Beryl gave him an abridged account of their recent interview.

"She wants to have it out with me to-night at the dance? Well and good," he said, with a laugh of amusement. "Oh, don't be afraid, dearest! I will not wound her precious self-esteem more than I can help. Remember, she is to be my sister—I am to be her guardian and protector. Poor child! the flattery she has received because of that excessive prettiness of hers has turned her little head. She is to be pitied rather than blamed. We must marry her off, Beryl, and soon—and to some shallow-pated millionaire, if possible, who will find his *métier* in ministering to her wants and whims."

Slowly and through the shrubberies they returned to the house, and found themselves the only units of the house-party at home for tea, which was served to them in a dainty boudoir overlooking the gardens. Their *tête-à-*

tête within doors was as delightful to both as their talk in the garden. St George revelled in his own happiness as he watched his love pouring out tea, while they murmured to each other in low voices, and he gave her slight verbal sketches of the scenes they would shortly be enjoying together. As she rose to proceed upstairs, startled by the sound of carriage wheels—the excursionising house-party arriving home—he held her back with a somewhat plaintive request.

"You won't wear black to-night?" he asked. "Somehow, I don't like it!"

"Not if you do not wish it!" she cried, snatching away her hand with a merry laugh, and rushing away.

She smiled as Pearson somewhat anxiously asked her what she would wear. "That black dress you are so partial to got torn last night, m'm, and I only found it out just now. That white costoom you wore at the Hunt Ball would be quite the thing for a grand dance like to-night's," she boldly suggested.

"I meant to wear that," said Beryl, meekly. For the first time in her life she arrayed herself with intense anxiety to look her very best. Not thinking herself beautiful, or even pretty, she was only half-satisfied with her appearance as she stood before her long glass, and said, "Don't flatter, my dear woman!" as Pearson

told her with satisfaction that she looked "a perfect dream."

"Cynthia is far, far more suitable to him in looks," she sighed to herself as she went below. "But then—he loves me—he loves me!"

CHAPTER XXII

As Cynthia opened the door of the blue drawing-room, Beryl saw that the whole house-party was assembled. There seemed an unusual buzz, as if everyone talked at once. Then Lord St George, who had evidently stood close by the door, on the watch, took her hand.

"Everyone knows and approves; I have had nothing but compliments and congratulations," he said, as he led her proudly among the guests to where Lady Ivordale was standing, beaming at them, as she raised her long-handled glass to her eyes and detected the advancing couple.

"My dear child, nothing could have delighted me more, I assure you; and that you should have engaged yourselves under our roof makes us feel as if you were quite our own children," she exclaimed, in a gratified, maternal way. "Doesn't it, Ivordale?"

"Most certainly!" warmly assented Lord

Ivordale. Then others came up, Beryl felt as if she were a perfect target for congratulatory speeches. As soon as the little crowd left her freer, Cynthia rushed to her, to Beryl's astonishment, with beaming delight upon her pretty face, and effusively embraced her.

"She has been so sly, I was never more astonished in my life than when I heard the news," she declared to no one in particular—if Cynthia had no real audience, she invariably imagined one. "You dear, misleading old thing, I don't think I shall ever quite believe in you again!"

Although Cynthia's felicitations were punctuated by silvery laughs, they had their sting for Beryl. But just then dinner was announced, she was led proudly out by her future husband, and as she felt him press her hand tightly to his heart, such a sense of comfort and rest enveloped her that she told herself that facing the future with him "nothing mattered very much."

Neither spoke at any length to the other during that gay dinner, which seemed like a bright fantastic dream to Beryl; but St George paid her numberless little attentions which were delightfully new. No one had as yet troubled about what she should eat and drink, excepting, she remembered with discomfort, her horror, Horace Davenant. It almost abashed her to find herself of such consequence, and to the

hero of her life. More than once the tears gathered in her eyes—tears of joy, relief, hope.

And there was nothing to mar her perfect satisfaction; for opposite them, Cynthia was encouraging young Henshaw as gaily as if she had never had a second thought for any other of his sex. Beryl felt with thankfulness that her younger sister had accepted the situation, and with characteristic caprice, very useful in the circumstances, had made up her mind to put up with the rich baronet's son since she could not be a countess.

"I told you what Cynthia was," said her beloved, as, dinner being over, they strolled into the oak room, a brilliant scene with chairs and banks of flowers ranged against its picture-covered walls, and its polished floor reflecting the myriads of wax lights in the old crystal chandeliers. "A pretty butterfly, hovering from flower to flower in the sunshine; the creature of the moment! No, I will not speak seriously to her. She ignored her foolish ideas as soon as she heard of our betrothal. We will follow her good example!"

The guests were arriving in detachments. Already a number of charmingly-dressed girls and young matrons brightened the great, lofty old chamber. St George had insisted on dancing the first square dance with Beryl, although he confessed to an entire distaste for the pastime. "I

feel such an idiot posturing about," he explained. Then Cynthia and Lord Wilmesley, and the other two couples who had undertaken to display their accomplishment, danced the minuet.

It gave Beryl real pleasure to watch her sister's graceful movements, the poise of her pretty head, her sweeping curtseys. Then the music was so quaintly delicious.

"It is really worth seeing," she began, to her lover, who was seated at her side, when she stopped short. She felt as if someone had given her a sudden, cruel blow—Horace Davenant had walked into the room and she met his eyes fixed upon hers with a malignant, cruel expression—a baleful stare.

For a few moments she felt overcome—almost as if she might faint—for she had not given a thought to the possibility of Davenant appearing at Stretfield Court. Of course he knew of her engagement. After that horrible, vindictive gaze she had no doubt.

Then she roused herself. What? She was to allow her and St George's future happiness and peace, and the unfortunate St John's safety, to be ruined by an unscrupulous schemer such as Horace Davenant had already showed himself to be?

"If I do, I am a coward, and unworthy to live!" she told herself. Her colour returned—her self-possession was restored. She turned to her betrothed and conversed as calmly as if no

such being as her enemy and professed adorer, Horace Davenant, existed.

Meanwhile, although she did not exactly look at him, or even glance in his direction, she watched him stealthily out of the corners of her eyes, and was painfully aware of the fact that, as the minuet came to an end, and the gay crowd swayed hither and thither freely before the "dancing men" sought partners for the ensuing waltz, Davenant was edging his way, skirting the walls, towards her and Lord St George.

What would he do? she desperately asked herself. She had seen him in the white heat of passion, therefore felt that it was within the bounds of possibility that he would "make a scene"—perhaps insult the Earl or herself, or both.

She watched him sidling nearer, his pale face set in an evil expression, and nerved herself for anything which might occur, strung in her sense of right and her faith in her noble lover.

"Whatever happens, my beloved will be my protector, my preserver, as far as may be," she told herself; and braced by her confidence in her true and faithful knight, she met the young man's cruel stare with a steady gaze of bold defiance.

How like he was to a serpent, she thought, as he made his way sinuously between the little groups, came up to them, and glancing with a set smile from Lord St George to herself, said, "I must beg pardon for intrusion, but I have a

message to deliver to Miss Dormer from Lady Beard."

Beryl's whole being seemed to shrink and shudder in actual loathing, but she had not lost grip of her impulses.

"Yes?" she replied politely. "May I ask what Lady Beard's message may be?"

The long, lithe man seemed to wriggle, to writhe, as he shrugged his shoulders with a deprecating air.

"It is a message—private—confidential—to be delivered *tête-à-tête*, if Miss Dormer will spare me a few minutes, my lord," he said, glancing obsequiously at Lord St George. "It is really a matter of supreme importance, or I would not suggest an adjournment with Miss Dormer."

There was something so cringing, mean, and contemptible about her enemy that Beryl's courage rose. It seemed to her as if so wretched a creature could hardly harm a good-sized fly, far less Lord St George's future wife! She turned to her betrothed.

"If you will excuse me, I will hear this message of Lady Beard's, and return to you in a few minutes," she cheerily said, smiling at him.

"Certainly," he cordially agreed, springing up. He watched her tenderly as she gave him a sweet look over her shoulder and departed with Sir Harry's secretary.

"And now, what is this wonderful message?" she scornfully began—scornful in her resentment

at his daring interruption for, as she confidently believed, no warrantable cause—as she accompanied Davenant along the ballroom.

"I will tell you when we are alone," he menacingly, sternly replied, and the extraordinary transformation of the servile groveller into the haughty dictator was so startling that she told herself miserably that she must fight the matter out with this double-faced young man, fight bravely but subtly. As she proposed "having their talk in the corridor outside," and he grudgingly acquiesced, she remembered the authorised command, "Be ye wise as serpents, and simple as doves."

"To my beloved and to my own people I will be the dove," she told herself as she passed from the heat and glare of the ballroom into the dimly-lit corridor. "But with this man, I will try to be as subtle as the proverbial snake!"

She set her small, strong white teeth, as, pausing after they had proceeded a few yards along the silent corridor, she promptly seated herself on a low chair, and pointed to another standing opposite. Like many old-fashioned corridors, this one was narrow.

"You can sit there, Mr Davenant," she began, with the air of an offended empress. "I can hear your message."

He glared at her savagely.

"Like the rest of your sex, you think that a social rise enables you to crow over everyone," he

hissed, and he leant up against a cabinet close by, so close that she shrank back with detestation of his nearness. "Fool! Fool!"

"Kindly say what you have to say, and let me go back to the ballroom," she cried emphatically—looking fearlessly up into his eyes.

He laughed derisively. "We will soon bring you down to Mother Earth," he sneeringly said. "I have no message from Lady Beard. Of course she wishes for your return, because she is infatuated, that is all! What I have to say to you is this: you must make terms with me—or your precious lover will be clapped into prison as well as your precious brother! I have only to say what I know, to prove that your noble Earl has perjured himself to keep Dormer's prosecutors quiet, and there will be a scandal the like of which has never been, since goodness knows when!"

She looked up at him, calmly, coolly.

"Explain, if you please!" she returned.

"I see you do not grasp the situation—that you have been lied to from first to last," he acridly began. "I must begin at the beginning. Your brother, encouraged by the absence of his master, and having speculated until he had not a penny of your or your sister's money left, falsified accounts, forged Lord St George's signature, and steeped himself in theft of every sort and kind. Whether he hoped to redeem his position I cannot tell, but as soon as discovery was imminent, he disappeared. He little knew that his employer's

passion for you was so strong, so abnormal, that he positively perjured himself to save him. He also did not think that old Mr Lambton would prosecute him for forging his acceptance to certain bills. This is where *I* come in, and intend to come in. You have deceived me—you well knew you had Lord St George at your apron-string, but you did not tell me! I mean to punish you—if you do not make terms with me. I intend to disclose your brother's hiding-place, so that the detectives put to hunt him by Mr Lambton will get him. Then the whole St George scandal will come out. The world will know that the present Earl has compounded a felony and disgraced himself by swearing a lie, because he had a passion for a girl who was a felon's sister. Society will batten and fatten on such a choice scandal as that!"

There was an intensity of vindictive malice in the hissing words which seemed to freeze her. Were they lies? If so, they were specious, plausible falsehoods. She had felt that her beloved was keeping St John's affairs rigidly to himself. What if he had gone too far in shielding her miserable brother? She had heard of such a thing as "compounding a felony." Inwardly, in throes of unspeakable anguish, she still had strength enough to command her exterior, to repress all sign of her inward agony of dread and grief.

"What proof can you give me that you are

speaking the truth?" she sternly asked, rising and looking fearlessly into his black, revengeful little eyes. "Why should you be true, and everyone else false? How did you come to know these extraordinary things?"

"I anticipated your question," he sneeringly said, "I have been straightforward with you! I told you that I was hiding your brother from the detectives, and should continue to shield him if you behaved well to me. Many men hearing what I heard on my arrival to-night would have done their worst on the spot! But I give you a last chance of making terms with me, as your brother suggests. Here is a letter from him. He found he must make a clean breast of everything to me—and he did so. Read it, please!"

He drew a letter from his breast-pocket. As he handed it to Beryl, and she recognised St John's peculiar, but familiar, handwriting, her strength almost failed her. She sat down again, and read the contents of the envelope.

On an ordinary sheet of notepaper St John had written :—

"BERYL,—You doubtless hate me. Little wonder! Still, blood is thicker than water. I am your only brother—and you may save my reason, even my life, for prison would kill me! Beryl, sister who used to love me, in the name of our dead mother I implore your help. It will be

so easy to give it: you have only to do as my good friend and protector, Horace Davenant, asks —you have only to be guided by him to the letter (mind that! to the letter) and you will save from despair and death your most unhappy brother, ST JOHN."

There was no possibility of doubting that St John wrote those words. Closing her eyes, inwardly appealing to Heaven with the mute passion of the desperate, Beryl acknowledged that to herself.

"What do you want of me?" she hoarsely asked, raising her beautiful, despairing eyes to his, fixed upon her, she thought, with triumphant malignity. She had seen that expression, but faintly, in the eyes of some boy gloating over a captured creature.

"Come back with me to-night," he imperiously said. "Simply tell your lordly lover you must do so, also that you postpone your marriage, without giving him one word of explanation. Refuse, and to-morrow St John will be in the hands of the police, and the first act of the sensational drama of crime and folly will have begun!"

"But—why?" she passionately cried. "What good will it do to you, whom I despise for your conduct, your deceit—for this behaviour to-night most of all, if I return with you—if I consent to postpone my marriage in such a preposterous way?

It will not make me like you better—nor can it help St John!"

He laughed—a low contented laugh.

"How it will benefit me, my child, is my affair," he returned, gazing down at her with seeming amusement. "You have only to choose—whether you will do as I advise, and thereby oblige me to see your brother safely out of the country to a place where he cannot be arrested, or whether you will refuse, and let matters proceed to their bitter end, both for St John and the Earl of St George. I warn you, this is your last chance! After this, I proceed without mercy, for I am so angered by your duplicity in concealing this love affair of yours from me and from everyone else—for neither Sir Harry nor Lady Beard had any inkling of it—that I would rather see you in the pillory of public shame, I do believe, than take possession of you as my own!"

His harsh, brutal speech seemed to her like a shower of stones from which it was hopeless to endeavour to shield herself. Temporise with this cruel being was all that could be done, she told herself—temporise, for otherwise he would do his wicked will without a qualm. That she felt.

"You only mention your part of the bargain!" she said, after a brief pause. Her lips were dry—her eyes seemed to scorch their sockets. "What I want to know is, what I am to gain if I do as you want—postpone my marriage without giving

Lord St George any valid reason—returning with you to Ilkfield to-night?"

"You will gain, as I said, your brother's emigration to a safe place," he returned more placably. "You have accused me of lies. I will prove to you I am no liar! Return with me to-night, your marriage postponed, and as soon as you please you shall be taken by me to St John's hiding-place—and shall yourself, if you like, accompany him to the seaport where he can start for the spot we choose as the safest for him for the present!"

She considered for a few moments. If she utterly refused this man's help—was it possible that St George would be able to fence his threats, and himself see St John through?

"Give me time, sir," she said, somewhat haughtily. "Half-an-hour will be enough!"

"Not—one—moment!" he sternly returned. "You choose—now! Leave me—and I proceed to Ilkfield and give your brother to the police—for he is there—in the village!"

He meant what he said. She saw it was no idle threat. No! He had laid a trap for her, and she was netted, caught, at his mercy.

"You want me to start at once—without a word to anyone?" she plaintively asked.

"Oh, dear, no! You have to tell Lord St George your intentions," he coolly replied. "I know, everyone in the house knows, for your Earl is so indiscreet in his gratified vanity, that you meant

to leave for your uncle's to-morrow, escorted by him, and that you have no intention of revisiting Ilkfield. You must go to him now and tell him flatly, without giving any reasons, that you have changed your mind; that for a certain reason which you also cannot give you are returning to Lady Beard. I shall stand by, and listen! If you say one—word—more—"

He stopped short, and significantly drew a bright little revolver from his pocket. "For him first—then for you—then for me!" he said with a smile, returning the deadly toy to its hiding-place.

Evidently, she swiftly thought, the man was mad! She must risk all—everything—anything! She could explain everything later to St George. He loved her—trusted her. He would understand.

She heaved a deep sigh. "May I not even tell him I will write?" she asked, in seeming despair. She intended to act a part, and began at once.

"No," he peremptorily returned. "I will give you your instructions. You will return to the ballroom, now, with me, and will go back with me to where Lord St George is sure to be waiting for you. You will say—coldly, mind—that you have decided to return to Ilkfield to-night, and that you have also determined to postpone your projected marriage. You will not speak one word more—and will refuse his escort to the carriage, which I ordered up from the stables as soon as I had made up my

mind what to do. You will neither shake hands, nor languish at him. If you do, I will shoot you both dead as I would shoot a couple of mad dogs!"

She gave a little laugh—well feigned, although cold drops stood on her forehead as she realised St George's peril. If it had only been herself she would not have cared, but for any harm to come to him through her? Her mind was made up. She would rather insult him publicly than see him laid dead at her feet by the bullet of a maniac!

"Come," she firmly said, with a cool but determined glance at her enemy, and, steadily, she made her way back to the ballroom. There was a pause between the dances. The musicians were gazing idly down at the gay, surging crowd. She saw Lord St George seated where she had left him. He rose, smiling, as she appeared, but as she came up, followed by her tormentor, his smile faded; he gave a startled glance from her to her companion.

She made a little gesture as she went up to him, as if to stay his speech.

"I am obliged to return to Lady Beard to-night, Lord St George," she said, calmly, gazing fearlessly into his eyes. "And our marriage must be postponed."

Without another word she abruptly turned and fled. As she sped along without turning her head to see how the Earl had taken her seemingly

insane behaviour, she had but one thought—to save him from a madman's revolver.

"Until I have saved him—and St John—I must fool this wretched creature to the top of his bent," she told herself, as, safely out of the ballroom, she turned and asked him coolly to take her to the carriage.

He seemed astonished; at all events his manner, as he said it was in waiting and offered her his arm, was obsequious. With a long, stealthy sigh of relief she felt as she took her seat in Lady Beard's brougham, and drove away into the dark night *tête-à-tête* with Davenant, that that supreme, daring act of renunciation had possibly saved her beloved from death, if it had destroyed his faith in her and even killed his love.



CHAPTER XXIII

CALM, in full possession of her faculties, telling herself that even if she had disenchanted her lover so that he would never care for her as much again, she was ready and willing that it should be so if by it his life and peace were assured, Beryl leant back in the carriage and asked Davenant the particulars of his scheme to save her brother from discovery and arrest as if she were entirely with him in the matter.

He was evidently taken in by her coolness, her acquiescence, and by her steady gaze into his eyes—which somehow greatly disconcerted him—and he stammered as he hastened to give her the details of his plan.

"You see, one of those wretched detectives was on St John's track, and he rushed off to me to see if I could hide him," he began. "That was the very day you left for Stretfield. Dormer was disguised, naturally, and I was able to pretend that he was an old servant of my family, when Sir Harry inquired who the poor old beggar was. I lodged him with some farm hands, desperately

stupid people, who would be taken in and believe him the old man he seems. Then I got him a passage to a South American port. We, you and I, and he, must leave Ilkfield to-morrow by the workmen's train to be in time to catch the express to Bandon. There we change for the train to Liverpool, where we shall arrive in time for him to go on board. I have invented a name for him, and I believe his safety is, now this moment, as assured as his doom would have been if you had not flouted that conceited ass of a lover of yours, and come with me as I asked!"

Those last words were spoken with such ill-concealed passion that Beryl inwardly trembled. Still, she preserved her composure; she remained mistress of her resources.

"You have been generosity itself to St John," she gently said.

"Only for you!" he exclaimed, turning towards her. "You — you — I have wanted nothing in this world but you, since I first set eyes on you—and I mean to have you, in spite of your ambition to flaunt before the world as the Countess of St George! Do you hear?"

"I hear," she quietly returned, placing her hand tranquilly within the padded loop as she leant back.

"I don't care if you hate me like poison," he went on viciously. "All the more triumph for me when you are my wife, at my beck and call, as you will be!"

He laughed, defiantly, triumphantly, and gazed aggressively at her as he flung himself back into the corner. Did he expect her to deny, she wondered?

She sighed.

"I seem to have but one thought, one wish, to know poor St John safe!" she deprecatingly said.

He seemed taken aback, and frowningly stroked his shaven chin, glancing furtively at her white profile the while.

"You women are incomprehensible, unfathomable!" he roughly said, after a brief pause. "I don't believe you know what the word 'love' really means. It is all vanity, pride, conceit. You wanted to be a countess, but now you find that if you don't give that notion up your name will be dragged through the mud. So you give it up; upon my word, I think that is about the long and the short of it!"

"You have evidently very little belief in me, or in anyone," she retorted, mildly. After the awful wrench—that curt speech to the man she adored at the bidding of the man she loathed—she felt she had endured, and voluntarily, the worst that life could inflict. "After this the deluge," she had thought.

"Belief, indeed!" he acridly said. "I have only one belief—that, as Falstaff's shrewd old follower Pistol said, 'the world's mine oyster, which I with sword will open.' Treat your

fellow creatures as friends, and be spurned. Lash, threaten, circumvent them, and they fawn upon you, as your precious brother St John has fawned, as you are fawning now."

Once more she had to brace herself with the belief that Davenant was mad. To think him bad was unbearable.

"I hope you will change your opinions by and bye," she cautiously said. "And I hope you will find St John grateful. Here we are talking of anything but business, by the way. You have not given me my orders as to what I am to do, and say, from now till to-morrow morning."

"I expect Lady Beard will have retired when we reach home," he began, more naturally. "But if you see her, have to see her, you must make some excuse to account for your return, anything you please. Then go to bed, and sleep if you can. Pack a small bag—I will wake you by knocking at your door in good time in the morning. But mind, no letter-writing, no cheating me by leaving letters behind with explanations!"

Then and there he insisted on her swearing, with a blood-curdling oath, that she would leave no trace by which the household or their hosts could imagine the cause of their stolen journey. It was horrible to her; she felt degraded by being brought so coarsely to book—but Davenant clinched her acquiescence with a powerful incentive.

"I daresay the detectives are not far afield, and may pounce upon him before he is safely out of the country if the slightest possible clue to his whereabouts is forthcoming," he said, meaningly.

By the time the brougham drew up at the door of Ilkfield Grange, Beryl felt spent and exhausted. It was a tremendous relief to find the household in bed, except for the sleepy man-servant left to sit up, who seemed, indeed, too overcome by drowsiness to notice her arrival, and to be possessed by but one idea—to lock, bolt, and bar the front door as speedily as possible after their entrance.

Sleep was impossible. She lay on her soft bed thinking, thinking, cogitating—sending up incoherent thanksgivings to Heaven that she had had the presence of mind to avert immediate peril by a bold stroke, although it might cut short her own happiness for ever—and mutely craving help for the forthcoming extravagant and extraordinary proceedings.

Now and again she felt a misgiving lest after all Davenant should have so cheated her that the meeting with St John was a bold ruse, and the whole scheme a tissue of falsehood.

As the black, cloudy night gave place to gray dawn, and the dusky shadows fled at last before the sober daylight, she told herself that on one point she must be absolutely firm: Should St John fail to appear at Ilkfield station, she must

decline to take the train, and return to the Grange.

"If he is not forthcoming, the whole thing is a falsehood," she determined, as she quietly rose and dressed.

It was barely five o'clock when a stealthy tap on the door-panel made her start. She stopped still, and listened.

How that man could creep about, she thought, as going to the door, she opened it.

He stood there, and by a gesture beckoned her out. Then he took the key from the lock inside, pocketed it, and softly closed the door. It did not need his meaning gesture to warn her to step softly. She tiptoed after him, along the old oak boards of the corridor, down a newly-added stone staircase, and by a door he had evidently unbarred beforehand, into the grounds.

The door was that leading from the offices into the kitchen garden. The windows overlooking the rows of young cabbages and cauliflowers were closely blinded, for it was too early for even kitchen and scullery-maids to be astir. She followed him along the path skirting the house, through a shrubbery, where now and then he paused to listen—and she followed his example, understanding that he feared meeting gamekeepers or farm-labourers—through a field of young wheat, into the Ilkfield road. Then he spoke for the first time.

"Give me your bag," he said, taking it from

her. "We had better go by the fields. We will not talk, because voices travel when it is quiet like this. If we meet anyone, look unconcerned. If we should happen upon a detective, we shall have hard work before us. Are you prepared, by the way?"

"What do you propose doing in such a case?" she asked, as they walked quickly along a freshly-sown field, which sent up an aromatic odour into the soft spring air.

"If I change this bag of yours from one hand to the other it is a sign to you that our only chance of letting St John go in safety is to loiter —to keep the man back. You can see that, I should think?"

"Yes," she said. During the rest of their silent walk she strained her eyes in dread of some being who would prove to be one of St John's hunters. Twice her heart beat fiercely in terror, for twice they met men. But by their rough salutations in the dialect of the district her fears were on each occasion calmed. Meanwhile, ages seemed to have passed between the moment when she stepped out into the fair spring morning and that when she saw the station-roof between the trees, and heard a shrill whistle in the distance.

"The train," he said. "Make haste, I will run on and take the tickets." He rushed off. How he ran! She took to her heels, and followed him fleetly enough, but as she entered the ticket-

office he held up the magic slips to her and passed out upon the platform.

If it were all a ruse! she miserably thought, as she followed. But a bent old man with a long grey beard and shabby clothes, an old red scarf twisted about his neck, was standing by Davenant as the train steamed up to the platform, and as her eager eyes met his clear, blue orbs, she shivered, trembled, she felt suddenly weak, and to clamber into the third-class compartment whose door was opened by Davenant, seemed to need an almost gigantic effort.

The compartment was empty. "I 'spotted' it as the train drew up," cried Davenant, triumphantly, as soon as they were travelling at fair speed. But Beryl hardly knew what he was saying. St John's slim, yet strangely brown and soiled hand, had clasped hers. Those well-known eyes were gazing into hers, her heart was wrung between wounded love and outraged pride, shame that her own only brother should have come to such a pass, and dread lest he should suffer his deserts.

But St John himself brought about a reaction of feeling. Whether he read her thoughts and resented them, or whether his original bravado was still to the fore, matters not. He flung aside hat, wig, beard—she saw her handsome brother once again—his close cut golden curls, his small, well-poised head, his delicately-pencilled brows.

"For Heaven's sake, Beryl, don't stare at me as if I was a murderer!" he exclaimed. "Why did



you let her come, Davenant? Why didn't you explain how the whole brutal imbroglio came about—trying to make money for her and Cynthia's blessed dowries!"

Beryl gave a gesture—there was something almost solemn in her eyes as she gazed straight into her brother's steely orbs.

"Don't," she implored. "Don't let us talk of the past, dear, but of the future."

He muttered an oath under his breath. "I thought you would preach," he savagely said, flinging himself back, his hand instinctively seeking a loop, then smiling derisively as he recognised he was now a third-class traveller, and might even have fared worse. "I will turn the tables, and preach on my own account. I have heard how your lordling has made capital out of my misfortunes. You think him an admirable Crichton, of course. Beware! I warn you! He is the sort that torture the captured. I understood how he patronised me, to get you! Let him get you—and you had better be dead, I tell you that! Hush? I shall not hush. I will tell you, perhaps it is the last time I shall get the chance, who are our enemies, and who our friends. Your Earl is a miserable bungler at best; he would never have imagined how to see me safely out of the country. I have only one friend, and there he is!" He waved his hand towards Davenant, who was sitting at Beryl's right hand, and who leant forward and muttered something. "Shut up, do you say, old

man? No; that I won't! Beryl, this fellow has sold out of the funds, all his savings, to start me on my travels. If you don't call that a friend you deserve to be hanged, drawn, and quartered! By George you do!"

He thrust his right hand into his rough, corduroy pockets, and gazed angrily at her as she sank back, pale as death, an awful look in her lovely eyes. Why, oh why, had he used that expression? It brought back to her her beloved, the day he told his love, the passionate expostulation wrung from him as by force, when she presumed that he meant to marry Cynthia. But, after all, she told herself she must be just. If St John became a self-outlawed wanderer instead of an imprisoned felon, he owed it—of that fact there was not the shadow of a doubt—to Davenant.

She turned to him. "I hope you know that—in spite of everything—I am grateful to you," she faltered, hoarsely.

"We will talk of our affairs, yours and mine, by and bye," he returned, with mock respect. "At present we are none of us out of the wood; and as I seem to be the most practical person present, I feel it my duty to warn you, my dear sir, that we shall shortly arrive at a station, and if you do not reassume those properties, all the fat may be in the fire!"

"Thanks!" said St John, at once beginning to adjust his disguise, and by no means too soon, for almost as he completed the assumption of

wig and beard, the train began to slacken speed. In a minute or two they halted at a station—workmen and labourers filled the third-class carriages—nor were the three, to Beryl's relief, alone together again throughout the lengthy journey until they arrived at its end, a little behind time.

"I have sent on his kit; we have nothing to do but to get to the wharf as soon as we possibly can!" said Davenant to Beryl, in a low, anxious voice, as they steamed into the terminus. "Of course, everything may be all wrong—still, I hope for the best. I will jump out and charter a fly—you will follow me with him, won't you? And just bear in mind that his name is 'John Downs,' and if inquiry is made, you are his former young mistress come to see him off. You understand?"

She nodded, and immediately after he had sprung out, followed soberly with her brother, who assumed the tottering gait of a feeble old man. Then they drove off, through the wide, bustling streets, the narrow, sordid lanes, until they drew up at the entrance to the wharf. There, feeling as if in some delirious dream, Beryl accompanied Davenant, still carefully carrying her bag, and the shabby old man—whom, as she followed, she almost disbelieved in as really and actually the youthful, brilliant St John—to where a huge vessel lay alongside the quay, getting up steam for its imminent departure.

It was hideously like a nightmare. The big ship, with its moving crowd, its officials and passengers; the deafening noises, the grating, rattling, roaring, shouting. If St John or Davenant had spoken, as they waited at the tail of the in-passing crowd thronging the narrow gangway, she was too deafened by the riot of mingled sounds to hear a single voice. Only when they were on board and below—she gazing in consternation at the bare cabin where the third-class passengers were busily storing away their simple impedimenta—did she come to herself. It was when St John suddenly took her hand and drew her aside.

"We may never meet again, old girl," he said, his grip tightening, his eyes glistening. "You can only do me one favour. You will? What? You won't promise?"

"No!" she boldly said, "I will not!"

He seemed taken aback for a moment. His grasp of her hand loosened. "You are a Dormer, with a will of your own, and Heaven pity the man who crosses that!" he murmured, with a certain exultant satisfaction. "Beryl, I forgot! I won't drive you! I will beg, entreat, that you will at all events give poor old Davenant time—you will not say a decisive 'No' to him—he has been so generous, Beryl! He loves you as no other man ever has, or ever will! Come, it may be my last word—request; you will not say 'No!' You will give him time?"



"I will give—him — time," she stammered, feeling spent, worsted, helpless. Then, how, she hardly knew, she was making her way back across the gangway—she was standing on the wharf watching the vessel gliding away—away —bearing St John into safety.

CHAPTER XXIV

BERYL stood on the wharf gazing at the black ship forging its way through the water, blood-red with the reflection of a glowing sunset, stood in a kind of stupor, staring—almost unconscious of her own identity, of what it all meant. Then she turned with a shiver as Davenant spoke at her elbow.

"He is safe now! Come along, the fly is waiting," he peremptorily said.

She turned and gave him a dazed look. Then she sighed. She was going back. Back — to what? To an estranged lover, to astonished employers who would be naturally aggrieved by and resentful of her exceptional and eccentric conduct.

Silently, she allowed Davenant to assist her into the fly. As they drove through the busy streets, she wondered mechanically what she could say in explanation to Sir Harry and Lady Beard. To Lord St George she would tell all—everything! But—would he listen? Would he

even see her? She was startled out of her brown study by the cab drawing up before a large building. People were coming down the wide steps. She saw men in livery through the glass doors. Davenant alighted, and held out his hand to assist her to follow his example. She shrank back, frightened.

"This—is not—the station?" she asked, half in assertion.

"No; our train does not start yet; you must have refreshment and a little rest," he said.

She hesitated a moment. Then she told herself that to demur was foolish, after the extraordinary concessions she had already made —obeying this man to the letter, even bringing a bag of necessaries should she have to stay the night. She sprang out.

He paid the cabman, then, her bag in hand, walked up the steps with her.

"Tea and cutlets were ordered by me," he said to a liveried attendant, who, replying "Will you come this way, sir?" led them to the office, where, after a brief parley, Davenant asked her to follow him—and crossing the wide hall, led her into the lift.

They were whisked up several floors, then Beryl, a little giddy, stood in a corridor where there were, it seemed to her, innumerable numbered doors.

"Four hundred and eight-seven, eight and nine," said Davenant, to a brisk chambermaid

in a pretty uniform. She smiled pleasantly, and preceding them along the wide corridor, opened a door.

Beryl found herself in a large sitting-room. The centre table was neatly laid for a meal. She was annoyed, disgusted. But she told herself she had voluntarily accepted the situation, and must go through with it.

"I am sorry you should have gone to this expense," she began, "I could have had some tea anywhere."

"Hush, here they come with the tea," he imperiously exclaimed. "For heaven's sake, don't give yourself away!"

As a waiter entered with a tray, teapot, covered dishes, hot plates, and placing them deftly on the table, asked "if there was anything else," and at Davenant's reply in the negative, departed, Beryl wondered what he meant.

"What do you mean—'give myself away?'" she asked firmly, as soon as they were alone.

"I mean this: you are not my wife as yet, but if they do not think you are, your character will suffer," he coolly replied. "The whole thing will be put right to-morrow; meanwhile I advise you to be careful! I wish my wife's name to be as clean as it can be after an elopement."

Her blood was up. She told herself over and over again that this man was mad—stark,

staring mad—and that if she lost her calmness, she lost all power of self-defence.

"I would rather 'they,' whoever 'they' may be, would not think me your wife," she coolly said. "I am grateful to you, Mr Davenant. But I strongly object to being here alone with you like this. I would rather go on to the station and wait for the train there."

She was moving to the door when he stepped between her and her means of exit.

"Listen to reason, if you have any reason to listen to," he hissed, and a bitter, vindictive expression shone in his beady eyes. "The first train by which you can reach Ilkfield leaves to-morrow morning. If you travel by the mail you will have to wait all night in the junction. What sort of a reception, too, will you get when you arrive? Can you explain your flight with me except by confessing the family disgrace? If you do, can you rely upon me to back up your assertions? You have not a leg to stand upon, my dear Beryl! Unless you return as my wife, you return with a reputation hopelessly smirched. No! I have got you—you are mine, safe enough! I knew how it would be, so I provided myself with a special license which will enable us to be married as early as I can get a clergyman to perform the ceremony to-morrow! We can return immediately, then, bride and bridegroom—and I will confess that I schemed to lure you away,

although I need not specify how. St John will be doubly and trebly safe! Think! I will allow you time to think, to ask yourself whether you are not safe, only, if you follow my advice!"

He leant up against the door. She sank into one of the big hotel chairs, and staring at the thick, bright-coloured carpet, wondered how she should escape from him—whether, indeed, escape were possible. The agonising thought that she was practically at his mercy sharpened her wits.

First she groaned; then she looked piteously at him.

"I never meant to marry you," she brokenly said, "but St John made me promise to be good to you! I cannot say 'No.' Only—why wait till to-morrow? Why not marry me to-night? Surely the license admits of that?"

She covered her face with her hands, as if in shame. In another moment he was kneeling at her feet, kissing her dress, drawing her hands down from her face. She let him kiss them. It was the only thing to do.

"Heaven bless you! You shall never regret this!" he hoarsely stammered. "But, by Jove! I must set about it at once, if I am to find a parson. And if I cannot persuade one of them—you will be content to wait till the morning?"

"Certainly," she said, with a sigh.

"Will you promise me to try and eat something, if I go at once?" he said. He did not suspect her of subterfuge. That promise of hers to St John seemed the crown to his inward triumph.

"Look here," he gently, respectfully said, crossing the room and opening a door. "This room was specially ordered by me for you, when I knew there was no hope of getting back. It was then that I tore up to town and got the license. 'Mammon wins his way,' you know, 'where seraphs may despair!' My room is the opposite one, across the corridor. I thought of everything. You promise to try and eat and drink? Oh, I want nothing! To think of you as my own is more than food and drink to me!"

He clasped her hand as she promised to try to make a meal during his absence, then kissed it passionately and rushed off.

If he could have seen her as she stood there, gazing frantically about, asking herself wildly how she could escape!

"I will go to the station, and at once!" she determined. "If there is no train, I will hide—hide—anywhere—I will walk miles to find a dark corner where he will not be able to find me!"

She felt for her purse in her pocket. It was safe. Then she peered out into the corridor. It was empty, silent. She heard distant feminine voices, the swish of water, the rattle of china. She could hardly realise that she was free. Free?

It seemed impossible! She stood half-heartedly outside holding open the door. Then, with a desperate impulse, she closed it and sped away. She would not go down by the lift. She would descend by the staircase. Turning the corner she came upon it, and went down slowly, listening with all her might. As she reached the ground floor she looked over the broad balustrade. There were gentlemen talking, men in the hotel livery bringing in luggage, but no Davenant.

"Pray heaven I may not be noticed," was her silent ejaculation as she left the staircase and made her way as calmly as she could through the big hall and vestibule, and down the wide steps.

Could she be really free? she asked herself, giddily, as she went along the street in the gathering dusk. It seemed so impossible! Then she hailed a passing cab and directed him to the station.

She shrank back in the corner, gazing furtively, fearfully out. If he should happen to see her! Once more she inwardly prayed with all her strength to be delivered out of the clutches of this madman.

Then she felt calmer. She alighted, paid the driver, walked into the station and inquired about the next train to the junction where she must change for Ilkfield.

"It's just this instant gone, m'm," said the old porter. "There ain't another till the 9.50

express. But you can't get farther than the junction by that, after that it's express to London. Perhaps you want to go to London, m'm? There's the ladies' waiting-room, if you like to wait."

He trundled his empty trolley off. It made a horrible clatter. Beryl stood on the deserted platform, listening to the shunting, the hissing, the wild banging as the carriages were coupled, the puffing of the engines.

It was either London, a night's wait at the junction, or, she frantically told herself, "the deluge," rushing away into the night to hide from her persecutor.

To wait meant discovery. As she stood there, forlorn, desperate, she told herself that.

"I will risk it," she thought. She turned to seek the ladies' room, as the old porter had suggested, when she suddenly stood, transfixed. Someone she knew stood at the end of the platform nearest the booking office, peering into the dusk. She recognised the tall figure before she realised that there was only one form in the world which looked like that—Lord St George's.

One instant's pause, then she rushed wildly along. As she ran up he turned; the flicker of a friendly lamp disclosed his beloved features —pale, set, corpse-like.

She seized his hand, clutched at him, gasping, "Save me! Oh, save me!" It needed much soothing on his part, many cherishing words of

solace and endearment, before she stammered out the principal points of her wretched story.

But his evident satisfaction soothed and strengthened her, as she sat on a bench in the dark leaning against his breast, his protecting arm about her, as he explained how he had followed them up.

"Love is the best detective, and now everything is all right, dearest; he has simply played into our hands," he assured her. He was ready to wait for the express. "What harm can he do us?" he asked. "A coward doesn't risk his neck for the doubtful satisfaction of firing off a revolver in a place like this!" But her evident terror of Davenant determined him to charter a special to take her, if not to her uncle's—that, he feared, could hardly be done—to a place of safety with some intimate friends who had an estate some fifty miles distant.

Only when she was reclining comfortably in the saloon carriage, after being fed by St George, who spent the time before the little train was ready in securing delicacies and champagne for his beloved, was Beryl able to give a coherent account of everything which had happened from first to last; and only then did the Earl grasp the exigencies of the situation and plan their immediate future to secure Beryl's comfort and peace.

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A few months later, when a rich summer was

ripening into autumn, two married lovers were wandering about the golden sands of a little, barely-known French watering-place.

Beryl, her slenderness less prominent, a lovely colour on cheeks and lips, her eyes bright with a new expression of happiness, threw herself somewhat suddenly on a bank of shingle protected by a breakwater, and with a coquettish, peremptory wave of her shapely hand, commanded Lord St George to be seated near.

"Well, what is it, your majesty?" he fatuously inquired, as he stretched his long limbs at her side.

"This," she said, laying her hand on his shoulder. "To be lost is very nice, I admit, but not to be permanently lost! It is time we found ourselves."

Married—by a strange cleric, assisted by the Reverend Mr Dormer, suddenly summoned by telegraph to play the parent and guardian to his niece, as well as to ensure the strictest propriety—the wedding of the Earl of St George to Beryl, eldest daughter of the late Mr Dormer, was announced far and wide with the utmost publicity. But then the happy pair disappeared. A Mr and Mrs Paul spent a summer wandering about Italy, and made their way to this obscure French watering-place by degrees, across country, but none suspected that they were the missing Earl and Countess of St George.

The Dormers knew and were amused. But

the fashionable world was first puzzled, then annoyed.

"If we do go back we shall only be harassed by that fellow," said St George, discontentedly. "And, more than ever now, I am determined to make your life as much one of calm and ease as life on this incomprehensible planet can be!"

"You are an angel to me," she fervently exclaimed, and, stooping, she kissed his brow with a passion remarkable in a six months' wife. "But, I have felt—known—that we could not go on like this. It would seem as if we were cowards, afraid of facing the world! So, I asked uncle to find out all about that unfortunate young man—and his position at the Beards. Sir Harry was very frank. He confessed that he knew all about St John, but that he felt that although Davenant had helped him, he had no right to expect me as a reward. Sir Harry will keep everything to himself, dearest! Uncle promises me in a letter I had this morning—it was marked 'Private,' so I waited to show it you—that if we come back to England there will be no 'Dormer scandal.'"

Lord St George gazed out to sea. There was a doubtful expression in his gray-green eyes. Then he suddenly looked at Beryl.

"Why do you want to go home?" he asked, suspiciously. "What do we care for the world—especially the fashionable world?"

"You don't and I don't," she resolutely said,



"But—my husband—others may! We have our duties, remember that!"

"Only to each other," he began, then he paused. He shivered, although it was one of the warmest of warm September evenings.

"Darling, there is a wind getting up, let us go home!" he said, and with infinite tenderness he lifted her from the pebbly ground, and reverently kissing her hand, placed it within his arm.

THE END

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